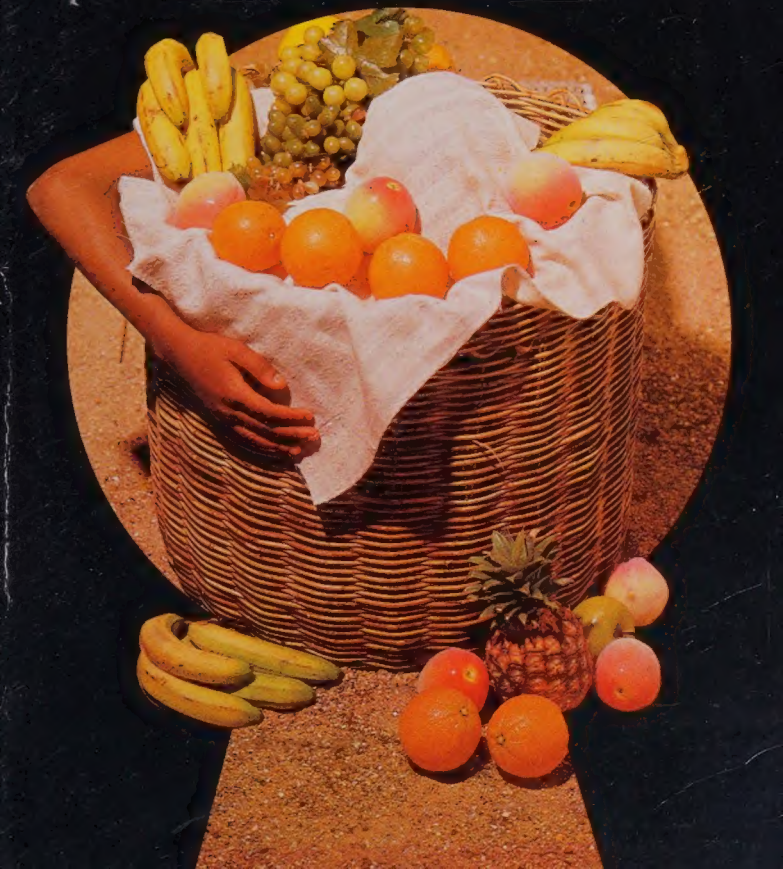
Keyhole Crime

John Wyllie

A POCKET FULL OF DEAD



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Quarshie concluded that if they did nothing they would never escape and they would almost certainly be killed. If he managed to get word to Uncle Tee it made it possible to hope.

So who should try to smuggle himself out and how? It could not be the white woman, and his size made a joke of it, a bad joke. Mrs Quarshie would blend into the crowds outside quite well, if she could get far enough away from the police station to join them. But Arimi had done something like this once before. He was agile, perceptive and courageous. The question was how to get him out . . .

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A POCKET FULL OF DEAD

John Wyllie

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To Yolanda

A Pocket Full of Dead

CHAPTER ONE

". . . everywhere they go people walk in fear."

The fourteen-year-old girl was fat, had beautiful eyes and was very unsure of herself.

As she hurried along the street, in and out of the long shadows of the casuarina trees, she was afraid she was being followed by creatures called the *mana'kpoi* by the people of her tribe. They were no more than knee high and they were mischievous, even malevolent spirits.

The girl's name was Ajua and she was not quite sure whether she believed in the existence of these creatures or not.

She was the only girl in her rather large village who was going to secondary school. There, one of her teachers, gratified by his pupil's intelligence, had told her that there was no scientific evidence to prove that the mana'kpoi and similar spirits existed.

Ajua had not been entirely convinced and, to be on the safe side, she decided not to look over her shoulder.

Sekodé, the village from which she had travelled by *tro tro* bus to Port St. Mary, was over one hundred and twenty miles to the west along the coast and she had come to the capital of the West African state of Akhana to find Mrs. Quarshie, whose family belonged to the same matrilineal clan as her own.

Dr. Quarshie, Mrs. Quarshie's husband, had his own clinic in Port St. Mary. It had been built with the help of donations he had received for his success in tracking down and termi-

nating the murderous behaviour of quite a number of criminally-minded Akhanians.

In coming to the Quarshies for help Ajua was being very brave.

No one else from her family had dared to accompany her for it was well known that the mana'kpoi, when they were on the rampage, would do no harm to anyone—as long as they stayed within earshot of another villager.

So it was anxiety which caused sweat to dribble from Ajua's hairline down her cheeks leaving parallel streaks through the powdering of red dust which coated her skin.

As she hastened through the late afternoon heat she remembered that one of the favorite tricks of the mana'kpoi was to fix their eyes so intently on someone that their gaze burnt holes in the person's flesh.

A boy in Sekodé named Kwajay claimed to have suffered this experience and was prepared to show anyone the scars all over his body which had been left after the burns had healed. The doctor in the hospital at Biliani, the nearest large town, had said that the scars had been made by a disease called yaws. Kwajay had insisted, however, in Ajua's hearing, that the scars had been made by a mana'kpoi and—as everyone in Sekodé had agreed—it was Kwajay's flesh so he should know what had happened to him.

Dr. Quarshie's clinic was fast becoming a private hospital. And for Quarshie it was an unwelcome fact that many of the patients who came for treatment tried to get in to see him, if only to shake his hand, even though they were in the care of one of the other doctors. Then these people could boast that they had made the "big" man's acquaintance.

Mrs. Quarshie, who had long been one of the most sought-after midwives in Port St. Mary, also gave part of her time to the clinic, and when Ajua arrived she found that the only way she could get to see her "sister" (in Sekodé all matrilineal descendants of the same blood line were "sisters"; in this instance Mrs. Quarshie was an elder sister of Ajua's mother) was to take a place in the queue as if she were a patient.

It was even necessary for a card to be filled out which she presented, with a little bobbing curtsey, to her "sister" before she sat down facing her.

"'Ajua Eketi,'" Mrs. Quarshie read aloud, absent-mindedly, "age fourteen. Rather young to be coming to see me, aren't you, child?" Mrs. Quarshie glanced up at Ajua and her "business" expression turned into a welcoming smile. "You must be the youngest of Patience's daughters." Mrs. Quarshie's mother had named her daughters after virtues which began with the letter P: the eldest was Probity, followed by Prudence (who was Mrs. Quarshie), Patience, Piety, Perspicacity, Philanthropy and, the youngest, Pertinacity. "And you've come all the way from Sekodé to see me?"

"Yes, ma'a."

"Then you are very welcome here, Ajua, even if you are not of an age to be visiting midwives."

"I am not . . . not with child." They were speaking English and Ajua's primary school had been staffed by missionaries who had taught her to speak that language by reading from the Bible.

"Then why are you visiting me?"

"Because, ma'a, your people in Sekodé need your help and those outside here would not let me see you unless my name was entered in a book."

Mrs. Quarshie sighed and said, "The white man introduced us to bureaucracy and we have taken to it as if it satisfied a great thirst. In what way do our people need help, child?"

"Men and women are dying, ma'a, before it is their time. Their deaths are being blamed on the spirits but, ma'a, the spirits never killed like this before. There is also much else happening that has never happened before and everywhere they go people walk in fear."

And Ajua told a story which troubled Mrs. Quarshie so much that she got up saying, "Wait here. I will fetch my son and he will take you to our house. The doctor is busy and I cannot interrupt him, but tonight you shall tell him all that

you have told me. It is the doctor's help that you need, not mine."

"Ma'a, it is your help, too, that we need, for though you have always lived in the city you are one of us and understand our ways. Will you come when he comes?"

"He has not said that he will come yet, so are you not counting the price you will get for your beans before the market is opened?"

"But we will make him come, ma'a. You and I are of one people. We will make him come."

With a smile Mrs. Quarshie said, "The mana'kpoi have not stolen your wits or your determination, whatever they may have stolen from other people, have they?" And she left the room.

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Arimi, Mrs. Quarshie's adopted son, was sterilising equipment from the pathology lab when she found him. When his parents had been murdered, Dr. Quarshie, his uncle, had not only discovered the murderers but the Quarshies had liked the boy so much that they had adopted him.

"Arimi, there is a girl here I want you to take to our house, please," Mrs. Quarshie told him. "Show her where she can take a shower, give her a clean cloth to wear and tell Hassan to have her clothes washed. She will be staying the night so he must make up a bed for her on the verandah. She is of my people and she has a story to tell that I want the doctor to hear."

He said, "Yes, ma'a," and as Mrs. Quarshie stood watching him as he put the last rack of test tubes into the steriliser she had to resist the impulse, which came over her rather frequently, to wrap her arms around him and hug him.

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"Your father is a famous man."

"My father *was* a good man and a schoolteacher," Arimi corrected Ajua. "My adopted father, he is also my uncle, *is* a famous man."

"Your father died?" Arimi was to learn quickly that Ajua's curiosity was as essential a part of her as her long lashes and beautiful eyes.

"He was killed."

"And your mother?"

"Killed, too."

Ajua looked down at the ground as she walked. Then she looked sideways at her companion's feet.

"You are wearing the same kind of sandals as I am," she told him.

It was a statement which called for no comment so Arimi did not make one.

"I am sorry your father and mother were killed. But it must be exciting to be Dr. Quarshie's adopted son."

Arimi nodded. "Why have you come to stay with us?"

"I am your mother's—your adopted mother's—sister."

"Have you met her before?"

Ajua shook her head.

"So why did you come here?"

"Do you believe in mana'kpoi? Our science master at school says I should not."

"Are they spirit people? Little people?"

"Yes."

"Where I come from they are called kibis. Dr. Quarshie says 'Science proves nothing except that we know very little.' Therefore it is better to say 'I don't know' than to say 'Yes, I believe' or 'No, I don't believe.' These—how do you call them?"

"Mana'kpoi."

"These mana'kpoi of yours, have you ever seen one?"

"No, but I know someone who has."

"Someone who says he has," corrected Arimi. "The only way you would know for certain that he had seen them would be if you had seen them yourself."

Arimi was rather small for his age. With a smile, Ajua asked him, "Are you, perhaps, one of them yourself, for you are not very big though it seems you are very clever?"

Rather sharply he replied, "It is often the biggest trees which are felled in a storm and when I answer you my voice is not my own but that of my uncle."

Ajua realised that she was in a position to relent, so she made him her confidant, telling him everything that she had told Mrs. Quarshie.

"Yet you ventured away from them and came here alone?" he said when she had finished.

"Somebody had to come."

As he looked at her, he added bravery in the inventory he was making of her virtues.

"It is good that I came," she told him, "even if it was only so that I should meet you." She was thinking of the stir it would cause amongst the other girls in Sekodé when she told them that Quarshie's son was a friend of hers. Certainly he was rather small, she told herself, but he was good-looking and very intelligent.

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Ajua was frightened, at first, of Quarshie. He was so very big and wore a severe expression on his face. Later she decided that this expression did not reflect severity but the mind of a man who thought about everything carefully and with concern.

When he smiled, of course, everything changed and she did not feel frightened of him at all. Also she liked the way he spoke with Arimi, considering the boy's words and asking him for his thoughts about everything they discussed.

He did not ask her at once about the trouble in Sekodé but about herself and her family. Her mother was one of the wives of the man who headed the royal house in Sekodé who, until recently, had been the Paramount Chief of all the towns and villages belonging to the clan.

Why had he given up the stool? Quarshie had wanted to know.

He had been tricked, she told him. There were five large villages populated by the Saysay people, each with smaller sat-

ellite villages. All of them were located on the shores of the big Saysay lagoon.

The member of the royal family in each of the larger villages held the title of Saysay-Kantcha—that is, head of all the Saysay people, in turn. However, no man could hold the title unless the sacred stool—it actually served each chief as a throne—was in his possession and it was ceremonially handed over by the people of one village to the people of the next one in the rota when their turn came around.

The stool was more than just a symbol; it was the embodiment of the power to rule and it had passed to Ajua's father almost a year ago.

Then one night it had disappeared and twenty-one days later it had been found standing in front of the house of one of the members of the royal family in another village. Twenty-one was a magic number among the Saysay and it was always taken to indicate change.

So the man in front of whose house the stool had appeared claimed that it was a sign from the ancestors who were discontented with the way Ajua's father had been using his authority and had called on him to assume the role of Paramount Chief.

Ajua claimed that it was a trick; her father was a good man and a wise chief.

And the other man, the usurper, Quarshie wanted to know, what kind of man was he?

Speaking slowly and choosing her words carefully, Ajua replied that he was not known to be a bad man. He had been to school and had learned to read and write.

Her father had not been to school?

No, she was the first in her family to have continued her education past primary school. Her grandmother, Mrs. Quarshie's mother, had said that she should be the one because she had been selected by the ancestors to play an important role amongst the Saysay. Not immediately, but later.

It was also her grandmother who had sent her to see Mrs. Quarshie.

At this point the steward, Hassan, told them that the food was ready.

They sat around the table but ate the pepper stew and *kenke* with their fingers. Mrs. Quarshie was not sure whether Ajua would be familiar enough with knives and forks to be unembarrassed by them. At the same time she thought she might sound patronising if she asked the girl whether she could manage the Western style of eating.

She felt that this was probably the first time that Ajua had ever been seated at the table with men and been waited on by a man and that this in itself was a radical enough break with tradition for one evening.

For a while, as they ate, Quarshie answered questions that Arimi asked about the equipment at the clinic and Ajua ate in silence. They were all dressed African style to fit with the elegant wax print that Arimi had chosen for Ajua from amongst his mother's many lengths of material. Ajua wore it wrapped around her body in a single piece, falling from beneath her armpits almost to the floor. It was held in place by a single neat twist of the cloth.

Mrs. Quarshie wore a similar cloth made up into a blouse with a square neck, puffed sleeves that were barely more than shoulder straps and a pleated frill around the waist. Quarshie and Arimi wore their cloths like togas with one shoulder bare. In both cases the material was richly but soberly patterned.

After he had satisfied Arimi's curiosity about an electrocardiograph machine Quarshie turned to Ajua and said, "Mrs. Quarshie tells me that many Saysay people are dying but that most of the deaths are not caused by diseases, accidents or old age. Is that correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"What are they caused by?"

"Fear, sir."

"You are not afraid?"

"I am afraid, sir."

"But courageous enough to overcome your fear. What are you afraid of?"

"Voices which speak from the trees at night, sir. People who walk out of their houses saying they have been called but do not say by whom and then never come back until they are found in the lagoon, or in the bush, or on the *kassava* farms dead and readied for their funerals."

"Killed?"

"There are no marks on the bodies to show that they have been killed."

"How many have died?"

"Four in Sekodé. Others in other places."

"Did these troubles start while your father still had the stool? Was that why the other man said the ancestors were angry with him?"

"No, sir. It only started a month ago. The stool was stolen four months ago."

"Stolen? It was not magic? Not the work of the ancestors?"

Ajua frowned. Then she looked straight into Quarshie's eyes, the way a woman is not supposed to look at a man, saying, "I don't believe it was magic or the work of the ancestors, sir."

And the same thought passed through Quarshie's mind that had passed through Arimi's: The child has beautiful eyes.

"But you can prove that it was stolen?"

"No, sir."

"Wasn't the door of the room in which the stool stood kept locked?"

"It was locked."

"Only your father had the key?"

"Only my father and his linguist."

"What kind of man is the linguist?"

"A good man, sir. My father's friend."

"And no one can explain how the stool got through the locked door?"

"I can, sir." It was Arimi who spoke.

"Yes?"

"Somebody got hold of the key for a few minutes and made an impression of it in wax, then had another key made."

"That's possible. Did anyone try to find out if either of the keys had been missing at any time?"

"I don't think so."

"Is your grandmother suspicious, like you are?"

"If she is, she has not spoken to me of it."

"Voices in trees, unmarked bodies in the lagoon and on the kassava farms, stools flying away through locked doors, anything else?"

"Yes, sir. People have bad dreams, not when they are asleep but when they are sitting with their eyes open. And mana'kpois."

"What are they, Prudence?"

"Little people," Mrs. Quarshie replied, "troublemakers, usually. Did you feel that you were being followed, Ajua, as you travelled to see us?"

"I might have been, ma'a. They might be outside now listening to what I'm saying."

"If they really are there, why do you suppose they let you come to see us?"

"I don't know, sir. I . . ." Suddenly there were tears running down Ajua's cheeks and Mrs. Quarshie was on her feet and had her arms around her, soothing her and telling her that she was safe and that they would not allow any harm to come to her and that Quarshie would sleep outside on the verandah and Ajua would sleep with Mrs. Quarshie and she would only have to reach her hand out to find her there.

"She is very tired," Mrs. Quarshie told her husband over Ajua's shoulder. "It has been too big a day for her. We'll go to bed. You, too, Arimi. Don't keep him up late, Quarshie. And tell Hassan to have cook make her a nice cup of hot chocolate and bring it to her in a little while. It will help her to go to sleep." The instructions came in a staccato burst of words.

Quarshie said, "Yes, ma'a," and smiled. Then he got up, put his big hand on Ajua's soft mat of hair and turned her face up to his.

He said, "Look me in the eyes, Ajua, like you did a little

while ago. Yes, like that. Now listen to me. Nothing will happen to you here, you will be quite safe. Do you believe me?"

After an intake of breath Ajua replied, "Yes, sir. But I shall only be here for a little while. Then I shall have to go back and I shall be afraid again . . . unless you come too."

Quarshie told her, "Don't worry about that now. It is something we shall talk about in the morning. Sleep with your head on Mrs. Quarshie's shoulder, like I do sometimes; it is impossible to worry about anything then. And I will think about what you've told me while you are sleeping. Leave all your worries with me."

****

"Are you going to Sekodé, sir?" Arimi asked.

They had left the table and were in Quarshie's workshop. It was one of the rooms in the servants' quarters at the back of the house. Quarshie called it his therapy room. Several people had said that he could have had international fame for his wood sculptures. He chose pieces of ebony, teak or other hard woods and allowed the flow of the grain to guide his imagination as he created semi-abstract figures which seemed to change their poses as the light struck them from different angles.

Seeing a piece of wood in Quarshie's hands fascinated Arimi because, although the doctor might be talking about something else, his foster-father's fingers fondled it as if he were feeling for the shapes and forms which lay inside it.

Now, as they spoke, he was patiently sandpapering a swan-necked curve and it was his fingertips touching it that told him where the hollow had to be fractionally deeper or the outer curve bolder.

"I don't think so," he told Arimi in response to the boy's question.

Arimi picked up a piece of wood and stroked it, as he had many times, but did not feel that it said anything to him.

"Anywhere in the world where you want to look for it, Arimi, you will find great trouble. And most of the people

who are in it have brought it on themselves. That is not often true of the sick people who come to my clinic. There is not a great deal of physical pain which they could have avoided if they had behaved more wisely. It is not something they bring on themselves. Curing those kinds of troubles is the work I have to do."

"Are not men troubled sometimes because other men, wicked men, harm them? Just like your patients, sir, who are attacked by germs and are not strong enough to resist. That's what you told me. Perhaps the people in Ajua's village are being attacked by human germs."

Quarshie stopped sandpapering for a minute. He said, "Give me the coarser sandpaper, please. This is not coming as quickly as it should." With the paper Arimi handed him he went back to work.

Arimi watched him.

Presently he said, "Having you here is like having a second Mrs. Quarshie." He looked at the boy with one eyebrow raised. "You both remember things I have said and throw them back at me when I am not on my guard. This time, perhaps, you have put your finger on the reason for my trying to do something for people who need to be saved from those who are the carriers of greed and impatience."

"And if you can't cure them, sir?"

"Then they must be quarantined and if they won't let themselves be"—the stony expression came back—"then we must remove them, in any way we can, from the possibility of making contact with those who are too weak to defend themselves."

"So you will go to Sekodé, sir?"

"Because a little girl tells us improbable stories?"

"Don't you think she is telling the truth?"

"As far as she can understand it, I am sure she is."

"Will you understand it any better if you don't go? If she told us that people were dying there of some epidemic you would believe her, sir, wouldn't you?"

Quarshie smiled again. "We'll have to make you into a law-

yer, I can see that. If there was an epidemic I could get detailed descriptions of the symptoms."

"I think she has been giving us the details of a disease that has different symptoms than those that appear in books for doctors." Then, because Quarshie still smiled Arimi tried another tact. "Mrs. Quarshie wants to go. They are her people and she believes Ajua."

"And she might go alone if we don't go with her and then she might get into danger. Is that what you are trying to tell me?"

"I . . ." Arimi saw an opening and took it. "Yes, sir, it is."

"And Ajua's beautiful eyes have nothing to do with it?"

Arimi felt uncomfortable and looked away. When his eyes came back to Quarshie's the big man was smiling again. "It's a mystery, isn't it, Arimi?" he said. "Mrs. Quarshie has beautiful eyes too, did you ever notice that? A pair of beautiful eyes can do things which logic and reason will tell any sensible man are quite childishly senseless. But then the world is full of mysteries. That is what this piece of wood tells me." He took his carving out of the padded vise and turned it in the light.

Quarshie smiled again and said, "Yes, you want to go to Sekodé and since school is out there is no reason that you shouldn't. Mrs. Quarshie wants to go to Sekodé and since she always gets anything she really wants there is no reason why she shouldn't go . . . and Ajua is afraid to go back if I don't go . . . and I am afraid of what might happen to you and Mrs. Quarshie if I don't go . . . so, I don't have much choice, do I?"

CHAPTER TWO

Her black "sisters" were kind to her, generous and gentle, but in the same way that they would be to someone afflicted with a terminal disease.

The lagoon was so long that anyone standing at either end of it would see water all the way to the horizon. It was divided from the Atlantic Ocean by a wide wall of sand planted with coconut palms.

Next to the lagoon, along the coast, there were salt pans, which were areas that, at the right time of the year, were allowed to flood. At spring tides, breaches were made in the sea wall and the salt pans were filled. Then at the following spring tide, when the sea was at its lowest level, the openings were filled and the sun would dry out the water in the pans and leave the salt.

Both the lagoon and the salt pans belonged to the Saysay, and since the lagoon produced some of the finest prawns to be found along the coast of West Africa and salt was a commodity which was always in demand, they were a people who were prosperous and healthy.

The Saysay were also, because they could afford to be, an independent people, with the result that they were tradition-bound to an abnormal degree and had shunned all inducements to join the rest of the country on its march into the twentieth century. They held very strongly to the cliché, used by all highly traditional people, that what had been good enough for their fathers was good enough for them. This char-

acteristic made the Saysay a happy hunting ground for anthropologists.

One of these was Linda Albini, originally of Burlington, Vermont. She had come, via a couple of Eastern universities, to do a field study for a grant-aided report she had titled provisionally "Kinship and Continuity: A Study in Social Cohesion Amongst the Saysay of Western Akhana."

Now, as she sat in front of her lagoon-side hut looking westwards across the water, in what she had described in her letters home as an "idyllic setting," she doubted her ability to establish the evidence she needed to underwrite her thesis because, she told herself, of her own weakness and because the seemingly factual foundations were being shattered in a quite inexplicable way.

Somebody had once described to her what it had been like to live in London during Hitler's war when the city was being attacked by V-2 rockets. The social cohesion upon which she had based her thesis seemed to be breaking up here in Sekodé as the cohesion had appeared to be breaking, all those years ago, in London and for the same reason—the insecurity everyone felt because death could strike without warning anywhere and at any time. Londoners had been on the verge of complete collapse because the threat was faceless: there had been no concrete physical presence—obliteration had simply fallen, unannounced, from the sky. Something rather similar was happening in Sekodé.

Some of the villagers had been able to work up a more or less fatalistic attitude. It was, they said, the will of the gods, or of the ancestors, or witchcraft, but this traditional fatalism did not help them to overcome their fears.

And, of course, she herself could not accept it.

Linda also had personal problems. A single woman of thirty-six could not live for any length of time in an African society without being made to feel an outcast, because she had no man and no children. Her black "sisters" were kind to her, generous and gentle, but in the same way that they would be to someone afflicted with a terminal disease. After a few

months she began to wonder if indeed there was not something wrong with her. Also, there was no one in Sekodé with whom she could discuss her anxieties. There were certainly wise men and women amongst the Saysay but their wisdom related to a life pattern which had been cast in a different mould to hers.

She wondered, as the palm fronds rattled above her head in a gust of wind off the sea, whether she should give up her project and slink off admitting defeat.

She was troubled, too, by the thought that the danger which seemed to threaten the people all around her might threaten her, also. And finally she was anxious about the fact that the man who had received her so well, the former Paramount Chief, had lost his position and the man who had replaced him made no effort to conceal his dislike for her.

He had told someone in her hearing, before he knew that she could speak the local language, that she was there to exploit the people of Sekodé—no white man ever came to Africa, he had said, without that intention. It did not help that she could not keep to herself but was always busy poking into the corners of people's lives and she could never explain to anyone's complete satisfaction her reasons for doing so.

Much that she did was, of course, widely approved. Particularly the first aid which she gave, without cost. Also she observed the Saysay taboos, spoke respectfully to the elders and taught the young new games to play, which helped to keep them out of mischief.

Nonetheless it remained clear that the new chief was opposed to her and suspicious of her, though not half as suspicious of her as she was of him. She believed him to be a usurper and that was the real friction point in their relationship. They both knew that each was a threat to the other.

In the beginning, Linda thought, it had all gone so well. Everyone she met had been exceptionally kind and friendly and almost immediately she had been absorbed into the community. A place had been found for her in one of the women's houses which was ruled by a remarkable old lady who was a

grandmother many times over and recently had become a great-grandmother.

It is one of the peculiarities of Saysay society that men and women live in separate houses. Even those who are married live apart, the women in the house of their blood relatives on the matrilineal side, the men in their patrilineal houses. Since men can have more than one wife but may not marry sisters, it means that they may have wives in four or five different houses around their village.

The head of the household who had welcomed Linda into her compound was a truly exceptional woman in that she was literate, in surroundings where the rate of illiteracy exceeded 95 per cent, and because she spoke English quite well instead of the ubiquitous pidgin. All this was due to the fact that before the turn of the century she had been the mistress of a white man, a trader who, if he had followed his natural inclinations, would have been a schoolteacher. He had taught her to read, write and speak his language.

When she had been about nineteen (those who were very old in Sekodé were always uncertain about their exact ages) the white man had been killed by cerebral malaria and she had returned to her people with a half-caste daughter. There, another trader, this time a Saysay, had paid a good bride price for her and had used her exceptional skills to improve his business. He, too, had died after a few years and his eldest sister's son had taken over the store. He was as shrewd as his uncle had been and he realised that while the village store had many assets, its greatest one was the woman who looked after it. So, though she was old enough to be his mother, he had divorced his two wives and had taken her; then he remarried the other two women whom he had divorced only so that his aunt could become his senior wife.

At the time of her third marriage, she had four daughters, one by the half-caste and three by her second husband. The new owner of the store gave her three more. For her first child she had chosen the name Probity, and since all her other chil-

dren had been girls she had continued to give them names which began with P.

Now, the old lady wielded powers greater than those possessed by any other woman in Sekodé and was consulted by the village headman and his elders before they made any major decisions.

It was she who understood Linda's need to be alone occasionally, a requirement which was inconceivable to most African women. So it was she who arranged for Linda to have a small beach hut built for herself on the shore of the lagoon. It was made of woven palm fronds on a piece of land which belonged to the old lady, whose name was Aba Corafye.

This was Linda's "idyllic setting," where she worked on her notes and where people would sometimes come to talk with her. It was no more than six square feet in floor area, but she had a mosquito net and a sleeping mat there, as well as a stool and a large gourd, which she kept filled with drinking water, and until now she had felt so safe that she had even slept there at night. Though each time she had done such an unheard-of thing Aba Corafye had scolded her when she returned to the compound.

Now she would not dare to spend the night there by herself. Exactly why she could not say, except that no one really knew what was happening. Part of her anxiety related to the fact that there were several strange men in Sakodé—strange to her that is, though not to the villagers. They were men who had left Sekodé to go to the big towns and were, it was said, back on a visit.

It was all, she concluded, a disaster.

She started to close the notebook, which she had had open on her knee as she sat there brooding, and an entry caught her eye.

"Violence is forbidden amongst the Saysay people as a means of settling differences of opinion. This is even true for the little boys," she had written. "When a play fight turns into something more earnest the adults move in and break it up."

As she saw it the question was, when the adults took to vio-

lence to settle a difference of opinion was there anyone, with the same authority the adults had over the small boys, to move in and stop it? If so there was an urgent need for such a person in the Saysay villages.

CHAPTER THREE

. . . to suggest that what was happening in Sekodé and the Saysay folk could be ascribed to a feud was as much a simplification as it would be to suggest that the first man who fires a shot in a war is responsible for starting it.

The noise at the lorry-park (Port St. Mary's equivalent to a bus depot in an American city) would make the normal activity of the latter sound as muted as if it were taking place in a funeral parlour.

Forty to fifty tro tro buses, built locally of West African hard woods on a variety of truck chassis, were loading passengers for all parts of Akhana. Their times of departure depended less on the clock than on whether the driver felt that the number of people already aboard were about all he could expect before his competition was due to start picking up passengers.

Many of the tro tros, in some cases fleets of them, were owned by successful market women. There was also a government-owned and -operated bus line which had a fairly regular schedule but served only a few of the major towns and cities. Biliani, where the Quarshies and Ajua were heading, was not served by the government line.

Quarshie had decided that his trip to Sekodé should be for the declared purpose of visiting his mother-in-law and that it should appear to be as casual as possible, therefore he was leaving his own car behind and they were dressed and were travelling "African." In addition both Quarshie and his wife

were wearing dark glasses in hopes that they might succeed in travelling incognito.

Arimi doubled over with laughter when he first saw them.

"You go be bush bush man, all two," he told them, using pidgin to emphasise his point. "Dissum now now go make you udder udder man, pass all. Na so?"

"Make you go catch 'um respec, one time, pickin," Quarshie told him with mock severity, "catch sabee? Or sometime I go tan yo nicker telee you cry."

"Yessah, massah . . . yessah." Arimi's laughter was choking him.

As they sat waiting in the tro tro—Mrs. Quarshie and the doctor in the front seat beside the driver and Ajua and Arimi in the back on the narrow planks which served as seats—the lorry-park boiled around them with a dense throng of would-be passengers, many of them with headloads, most of them running, shouting, calling, pushing, anxious, argumentative, bewildered and sometimes, in the case of the very young or the very old, totally lost.

Above all the noise the drivers shouted each tro tro's destination, argued about the cost of getting there, told those who were already on board to be patient, haggled over the price of delivering packages, turned away those who bewailed the fact that they had not got the fare and promised that it would be paid at the other end and eventually drove out of the lorry-park so loaded that if they had been canoes the water would have been washing over their gunwales.

The Quarshies had arrived at half-past seven and had been almost the first to board the bus. By nine o'clock the back of Mrs. Quarshie's cloth was wet with sweat.

Soon after that the driver started the engine and slowly, continually sounding his horn, he edged his vehicle through the mass of people who seethed around it like broken water in a tideway.

A passenger jumped off the back, dived towards an itinerant food vendor who had goat's meat on spits over a charcoal

brazier, bought three spits and then as the tro tro picked up speed ran after it, to hoots and jeers from its passengers, shouting for it to slow up. As he came abreast of the side of the lorry it sprouted arms, like the waving legs of a crab that has been picked up off the beach, which hauled the man on board where people's bodies were already pressed together as closely as minced beef in a hamburger.

Soon, somewhere in that dense pack of human flesh, two men with drums started to beat a travelling rhythm so that the tro tro developed a heartbeat of its own which pulsed more steadily than the engine.

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In the colonial years when Port St. Mary had served Akhana's rulers as their capital it had had several African quarters and a separate one for the whites. The houses in the latter area were now almost all inhabited by blacks, one elite having supplanted the other while the nonelite still lived in the native sections, which were even more crowded than before. So the lot of the poor had not changed except for the worse. Before independence they had been, more or less, exploited in the name of a "gov'mint" which was white and spoke English. The present government was capable of speaking several African languages, but it was more corrupt than the previous one —almost everybody, from the messenger boys up, had services that were for sale to those who had the money to buy them—and where the administration of the country had been carried out by comparatively few white men working in single-story buildings surrounded by gardens, today, there were ten times as many buildings packed closely together, all three stories high and staffed by twenty times as many black men as there had, originally, been white.

Quarshie had known Port St. Mary well in the preindependence days, first when he had been a student at the university there and later when he had returned from getting his medical degree at McGill University in Montreal and had been sent to work in an administrative capacity under a white D.D.M.S.,

who was a crusty old Scotsman, before being sent north to take charge of a bush hospital.

"Aye, Doctor," the old man had once told him, "ye'll be getting us oot and moving to take it all over for ye'selves before too long. And nae doot aboot it, it'll be an awfu' good thing. At least the bastards at the top won't be takin' money oot the country to spend elsewheer. But I'll bet ye a pound against a penny that the lot of the poor sods that work oot in the sun all day to scrape a few benis together to buy food to feed themselves and their bairns won't change a wee little bit. Worse off they'll be, I'll bet ye, but they won't know it because they'll be so full of pride at being free men. And when does a man know freedom, Doctor? I'll tell ye. It follows the moment when he knows, at last, that he's going to die." (The way he pronounced the last word made it rhyme with "tea.")

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Beyond the fringes of the town lay a narrow belt of savannah country made up of wide plains covered with coarse grass. Under the African regimes, for the first time in history, it had been cleared of tsetse fly so that herds of cattle could be raised there.

But with every advance had come a regression.

There was no tsetse fly but there were the pains of widespread unemployment. There were more roads and more people got killed on them. There were more medical services and there were more people who took advantage of them to make money. There were more consumer goods and more robbers to steal them.

The drums in the back of the tro tro continued to pulse.

Was it all leading anywhere? Quarshie wondered. Going forward, or backward, or merely spreading sideways so that there was simply more of everything, the good, the bad and the indifferent? He could find no simple answers.

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The rain forest came to meet them as they drove out of the savannah.

Nature, driven by heat and an immense rainfall, was showing how well she could overproduce, how far she could drive fecundity so that it went on working night and day the year round without seasons. In Akhana there was no fall or winter, only eternal spring combined with summer and continuous growth. Everywhere the forest was full of thick, lush leaves, towering trees and the drip of water falling from bough to bough with the force of the rain tamed so that it seemed to fall, all the time, through a leaky roof.

The soil was red, therefore the villages, in which the huts were built of mud, were red, too. In most cases the highway bisected them so that as each bus barrelled along the road it had to blast a way through clucking chickens, small, agile goats, shabby sheep and despondent dogs, now and then killing or maiming one of them.

The moment the bus stopped at a small-town lorry-park all the passengers disembarked to visit the market, which was usually nearby.

When they were off the bus Mrs. Quarshie walked with her arm through her husband's, savouring the feeling of being African in the same way an American walking down Main Street in any small town in the U.S.A., after having been away, might savour the feeling of being back home. Indeed, she thought, the life she and Quarshie led, most of the time, was like a crust over a deep pie and what was underneath it could just as well have been chicken or apples. Life in a big city was made up of the same ingredients whether it was being lived in Port St. Mary, Cairo, Panama City, Zurich or Leningrad. As the villages in Africa grew larger, modernisations began to creep in until, ultimately, they acquired an importance that was greater than all the previous preoccupations, such as living together in harmony, giving priority to the young and the old and making do with whatever was locally available or produced.

Though it could happen, Mrs. Quarshie thought, that even those societies could be torn apart by evil men in the same

way that some people were evidently tearing the people's happiness apart in Sekodé.

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At Biliani another, smaller tro tro took them down a side road and dropped them where a narrow well-trodden footpath led away through a field of kassava towards a distant line of coconut palms. Here Mrs. Quarshie and Arimi put their boxes on their heads but Ajua would not allow Quarshie to carry his. With his help she lifted it head high, moved in underneath it and then walked away along the path in front of him to join the other two, who were already in silhouette against the evening sky. And it occurred to Quarshie that she had evidently forgotten her fear of the mana'kpoi.

A little way outside the boundaries of Sekodé they met a girl friend of Ajua's who was told to run on ahead to Aba Corafye's compound to advise the old lady that they were on their way to see her.

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When they arrived at the large women's compound (which was built of cement blocks and comprised a series of rooms built around a mud-floored courtyard that was totally enclosed by its outside wall) greetings were exchanged with great excitement and emotion. However, they still followed a formal pattern of question and answer, though both Mrs. Quarshie and her mother were in tears.

It had been a long time since the Quarshies had visited Sekodé and, as the doctor went through the formalities, bowing, asking and answering almost the same questions that had been asked and answered by Mrs. Quarshie, he noted how the years had told on her mother. The old lady's hair was quite white, a neat, close-clipped, lamb's-wool cap of it. Her irises had faded to a pale grey and on her face and body the skin clung close to the bones beneath it. She was surrounded, too, by the smell of age, a dry smell not unlike that of a very old book that has remained unopened for years.

Her great seniority gave her exceptional privileges, one of

them being that she could wear her cloth like a man, leaving one shoulder bare. She could also dispense with certain formalities and taboos, looking Quarshie boldly in the eye, holding his hand and tucking it under her arm, giving him her old crone's almost toothless smile as winsomely as if she had been a saucy young girl.

She was reluctant to let him go and clung to his arm as he greeted those of Mrs. Quarshie's sisters who still remained in the compound. Aba's eldest daughter, the half-caste, was living in England, where she was district nurse in a borough of London on the south side of the Thames. The one who had followed Mrs. Quarshie in age had been killed in a road accident. The next one was Ajua's mother and one of the wives of the man in the local royal household who had, until recently, been the Paramount Chief. Another, who was the wife of a lagoon fisherman, was also a priestess in the local Gunsu whale cult. The last but one in the descending order of age was the wife of a farmer and was so pregnant that Mrs. Quarshie felt that she had arrived only just in time. It was the youngest one, however, who seemed most truly to have inherited her mother's talents: she owned a chicken farm and two sea-going canoes which fished off the coast on the other side of the lagoon.

Quarshie had to greet each of his wife's relatives separately. And then, unexpectedly, he found himself facing a white woman who spoke to him in English with a marked American accent.

She said, "My name is Linda Albini, Doctor, and I am very pleased to meet you. One cannot live anywhere in Akhana without hearing about the famous Dr. Quarshie."

She was wearing a print cloth, like Mrs. Quarshie and her sisters, while her bare feet were in African sandals. And if she knew of the taboo which forbade a woman to look directly into the eyes of a man except in private she ignored it and he saw that her eyes were very blue.

It was all very surprising. Not only was she white, but she

seemed to be trying to establish some sort of immediate intimacy.

"You are a long way from home, Mrs.—or is it Miss?—Albini," he said.

"It is miss, Doctor, and I have never been made to feel more at home at any time in my life than I have been here. I am an anthropologist and I am doing a study on the kinship systems of the Saysay and the effect they have on the social stability of the community."

She spoke the words like a parrot, using them as a smoke screen behind which her eyes were trying to say something he could not understand.

From Linda's point of view it was all unpremeditated. She recognised instantly in Quarshie someone with whom she could communicate—a man with an understanding of Western culture—and for her that was like flood water finding a channel ready to take it and drain it off.

This realisation was followed by another, which was that though she could communicate with him, perhaps he would not accept her need.

Lamely, she concluded, "I shall hope to be able to talk with you occasionally if you are going to be staying here any length of time."

Quarshie smiled politely and replied, "We must try to arrange that. And now, if you'll forgive me, I must find where my son and I will be sleeping so that we can have a wash and change our clothes. I shall be interested to hear about your study sometime or, perhaps, you should talk to my wife. The Saysay are her people and she may be able to help you in some way."

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Quarshie and Arimi were taken by Ajua to a men's house in which Aba Corafye's youngest brother was the headman and again they were both involved in a series of ceremonial introductions and greetings. This time Quarshie produced one of several bottles of gin which he had brought with him for

such occasions and, after a little of it had been poured on the ground as a libation to the ancestors to show them that they had not been forgotten, everyone—except the young boys—drank with him.

In almost every respect the men's house was a duplicate of the one they had just visited, with the older men sitting or standing surrounded by their nearest male kin, including young boys of eight or nine who had just graduated to the men's house from the care of their mothers.

Like Aba's compound, this one was also built of concrete blocks and contained a number of separate rooms around an open courtyard.

By now it was quite dark and the only light came from kerosene hurricane lanterns that were standing, here and there, on the ground. This meant that Arimi's impression of the many people who stood around them consisted of a flash of teeth as they smiled or an occasional glint from the whites of their eyes. It was all very strange to him, for although his family had lived in a fishing community, all the members of each family had shared the same compound.

Ajua, with two other girls, came with plastic buckets filled with water which they set down in the washrooms; as in most West African communities, bathing before the evening meal was imperative.

The headman's nephew had given up his room to Quarshie and Arimi and moved in with his uncle. The floor space of the room was about eight feet by ten and it had been left quite bare except for the new rush sleeping mats.

Their meal came and, as they were too late to eat communally, they ate it together in their room by the light of an oil lamp which was lent to them by another resident.

Because each day started with the first light of dawn and people went to bed early, Quarshie and Arimi were shown the men's latrines some two hundred yards outside the village and were then brought back to settle for the night.

Arimi, despite his strange surroundings, slept instantly.

Quarshie, however, stayed awake for some time . . . think-

ing of the many contrasting ways in which people lived in his country and how seldom he, himself, experienced these contrasts . . . thinking of what the next few days might hold for him . . . thinking that it was peculiar that such simple, uncomplicated people should be involved in what sounded to him like some kind of feud. . . .

He was to learn later that to suggest that what was happening to Sekodé could be ascribed to a feud was as much a simplification as it would be to suggest that the first man who fired a shot in a war is responsible for starting it. . . .

Thinking that the white woman, Linda, must find it very strange to live in such surroundings . . . thinking—and here his rambling mind came a full circle—about Mrs. Quarshie and wondering how she, too, felt about settling down for the night in a room by herself, or with a lot of females and without him . . . thinking . . . and here the living world about him gave way to sleep and to dreams.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Nobody likes an honest cop."

Jo Jo "Sugar" Ray Weston carefully unpicked the braids he had made in his hair before he went to bed. Along with combing out his hair, the whole performance took half an hour.

In America, Jo Jo had worn an afro as a sign of defiance aimed at the white establishment; in West Africa he wore it as a sign of defiance aimed at the black establishment and, as he saw them, the servile masses who accepted the dominance of their black elitist masters.

In both places he worked on the wrong side of the law because in both places he despised the men who were supposed to enforce it—despised them and used them.

He had lived in the black ghetto for thirty-five years with the words "Nobody likes an honest cop" ringing in his ears.

In the U.S.A. the big-city police were supposed to work for the city fathers and those who appointed them because they paid their salaries so Jo Jo made sure that the cops worked for him as well by paying them for "protection." This payment also allowed some sections of New York's finest to live more like the city fathers.

In Akhana, Jo Jo had found similar conditions: both sides paid the police for protection, and both sides still made more money than the police did.

Jo Jo had come to Akhana for two reasons; the first was that the man who had taught him how to build a business on stolen cars, gambling, prostitution and peddling narcotics had ended up dead in a used-car lot.

He was the man who had told Jo Jo, one of his most apt pupils, at the beginning of his apprenticeship, "Any wise ass with a gun can poke it in some honkey's face and separate him from a few bucks. And he knows the man will hand over whatever he's got because nobody is going to waste time arguing with a gun. You can keep your hands clean and make all kinds of bread, but that means paying the pigs their cut every time. That way you get respect, you know what I mean? People, when they see you, turn to their friends and ask, 'You know who that is? That's Jo Jo "Sugar" Ray Western, man.' And when you hear that, I tell you, it's going to sound real sweet."

It had, too, particularly after he had gone out and claimed his own piece of turf. And he had been doing fine until his teacher had tried to take some of his girls away from him. After that, the man had ended up dead in the used-car lot. Of course, none of Jo Jo's bunch had seen anything wrong, but Jo Jo knew that he had made a mistake: he had lost his cool.

The trouble was that the dead man had had a much bigger operation than Jo Jo's, so he had had a much bigger cash flow. That meant that he had been paying the police many more dollars than Jo Jo could pay and they had not liked being cut off from that money—besides the fact that it got the precinct talked about and written up in the newspapers.

His second reason for coming to West Africa (given that the first was the need to avoid being the victim of a revenge killing or being picked up by the police) was that he had collected quite a lot of money and felt that it would be a good thing to get it laundered by investing it in some sort of legitimate business.

So, along with his dollars, he had moved quietly out of the U.S.A. on a Black Star freighter to Liberia, where, when he disembarked, nobody had asked any questions which could not be answered with a ten dollar bill.

Now he was using his money to finance a regular business project in Akhana which could pay off in big—but very big—numbers.

In most respects, of course, his life in Akhana was that of an exile. The local population, by his standards, came from nowhere and was going nowhere. There was no real action, only penny-ante stuff, though some of the kids showed promise and were learning fast. Also, there were the women. Prostitution was not illegal so that were no payoffs to be made to the police; but there was no system, no organisation and no capital to establish the trade on a really profitable scale.

He was good at establishing systems and setting up organisations and he had capital. Also, he imported idiosyncrasies which helped to turn a natural physical function into an itch that needed the knowledge of special techniques to satisfy it. And he could invest his girls with a degree of class which made them sought after by those with money to pay for such an obviously superior brand of goods. Since the people with the money were mostly in government, the Army and the upper echelons of commerce, he occasionally came by some useful business in blackmail.

It was through one of his girls, the most intelligent of them, that he had found the right investment for the bulk of his money. She was a perfect front and, though she kept a place for herself in the house he financed, her role became more and more that of manageress there and grew into her becoming manageress of his other affairs as well.

She had also been a fast learner in the kind of game he liked best. It was played in the smallest sports park of all—a bed.

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Having finished his hair, Jo Jo dressed in his new, pale blue see-through shirt, which he left open to his navel, his wide black belt with its gold clasp in the shape of a scorpion, his scarlet pants decorated with gold embroidery in a vee shape up to his belt, back and front, so that it looked as if he were wearing a golden diaper, and a pair of custom-made, wedge-soled sandals with thongs made of the skin of a green mamba.

Ready to face the day, he looked around to see that his

room was tidy—he hated things to be disorganised or messy. Then, steeling himself the way a man does before diving into icy water, Jo Jo left his air-conditioned room to meet the haymaker of a punch the day was ready to swing at him as he stepped out onto the unroofed verandah at the head of the stairs outside his room.

It was as well that he had braced himself because otherwise the heat would have laid him flat on his back.

CHAPTER FIVE

. . . man-mischief . . .

A little before dawn a line squall passed through the Sekodé region and dumped on it, in a matter of minutes, more rain than many of the regions of the Sahel saw in a whole year. So the early morning was cool, fresh and stimulating in the same way that many spring days are exhilarating in some northern climates.

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When Ajua brought Quarshie and Arimi their breakfast the sun was only just over the horizon. They ate a kind of corn-meal porridge and, as a special concession to Quarshie's tastes, there was a small metal teapot full of very sweet black coffee. Mrs. Quarshie had brought a supply with her, knowing that it would not be available in Sekodé.

Ajua also brought them a small bucket of water for washing and told them, with a mixture of diffidence and officiousness, that she and her mother would be waiting for them as soon as they were ready. She was in her work dress, a cloth wrapped around her hips that fell to her knees—she was naked from the waist up.

Quarshie insisted that Arimi discard the rather ostentatiously expensive cloth which he had been wearing and put on an old shirt and khaki shorts. Quarshie also put on khaki shorts and one of his most commonplace cloths.

When they arrived at Aba's compound both Quarshie and Arimi were a little surprised to find Mrs. Quarshie dressed like Ajua for the early morning work of cleaning the com-

pound and pounding kassava. Both of them were rather put out by the fact that she treated them in the same way that her sisters treated their men—in a manner which maintained a respectful yet slightly disdainful distance.

Measuring his own unexpected response to Mrs. Quarshie's swift return to her roots, Quarshie thought how deeply he had been trapped into a city dweller's—and therefore a Western —attitude.

Mrs. Quarshie did not fuss over either of them, except to look in Arimi's ears to see if they were clean, and very quickly dismissed them both to return to her domestic duties. If Quarshie could have seen the faint light of mischief in his wife's eyes he would have realised that she had been testing him, as she quite often did, to see how truly he, a man of two worlds, maintained his claim to be an African.

Aba, on the other hand, smothered him with attention and again took his arm and insisted on leading him to her room, saying that she wanted to talk with him privately. Her room was no different from any of the others, except that it was permeated with the smell of old age that he had noticed before. It was also scrupulously neat and clean and Quarshie wished that he had staff who would keep the rooms at his clinic in the same immaculate condition.

In the cool gloom the old lady's smile was replaced by an expression that drew its strength from her shrewd old eyes as they bored into his out of their nest of wrinkles.

"This is man-mischief, my son," she told him, "that is causing our people loss of life and suffering, man-mischief and witchcraft."

"To what purpose, Mother?"

"That is for you to find out. Perhaps somebody is hungry for something he cannot get in other ways. Or someone thinks he has been wronged and his pain makes him want to inflict pain on others. He need not be an important man. A pig does not attack until it is severely wounded but then it becomes as dangerous as an angry lion. It will take only blood for blood."

"Patience will take you to talk with Oseidi III. He is a good

man but not a strong one, a peacemaker rather than a fighter. Heed what he says but do not necessarily heed his counsel. Rather be prepared to look for war, for it is not in him to oppose anyone with violence." Her expression lost its intensity and she patted his hand. "My Prudence looks like a woman who is happy and well cared for. She is lucky to have a man who takes only one woman and gives all his time to her. The boy, too, looks like a son who will be worthy of your household. I will talk with him sometime." It was a royal command. "Prudence speaks of him as if only you are more intelligent than he is and that is only because he has not had enough time to learn as much as you have."

"What of the white woman you have under your roof, Mother?"

The old woman narrowed her eyes and shook her head. "I am sad for her," she replied. "She has much virtue but it seems that she lives her life only in her head. We are given bodies and if we do not use them, they trouble us. My son, you have been to these people's countries, could it be true that they have it so cold there that ice forms in their loins and freezes out the fire which burns in ours?"

"It is often said by their own men and women that the latter are cold."

"And when they come here might our sun, perhaps, release the urge which is frozen in them?"

"I doubt that. The cold starts at an early age—many of them were taught to fear being face to face with a man."

"Our kin are wiser, are they not?"

"Well, at least they know that a starving body is disturbing to the head. Much that makes the white foreigner vicious and sickly comes from the fact that the men may burn with desire and may satisfy it and the women may not. You think the white female is such a one?"

"I do."

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Of Aba's daughters Patience was the most like Mrs. Quarshie. She was plump and usually she was smiling. Now, again

like Mrs. Quarshie when she was in a thoughtful mood, Patience wore a brooding expression which made her veil her eyes with her eyelashes and pout a little.

Quarshie had left Arimi and Ajua with instructions that the boy learn the geography of the village and its surroundings so that they would never need to ask how to find their way around.

"So, sister," he asked Patience, "your husband has not given up the belief that it is he who, by right, should be the Paramount Chief?"

"He has not given up, nor will he ever give it up. He does not show his strength but then neither does water seem to have any strength when you take it in your hand, yet it wears away rocks. He told me to explain that he has chosen to meet with you at the house of a friend because he thinks that if you are known to be an associate of his it may make your task more difficult."

"Are there many who symphathise with his cause?"

"All who are right-minded do."

"And the others?"

"Are working for the other side or are afraid of witchcraft."

"What makes them work for the other side? Do they have some blood relationship with the man you all claim to be an impostor? Or do they owe him some other kind of allegiance?"

They turned off a wide street made of mud-packed earth between two rows of huts—there were no paved roads in Sekodé—where some of the huts had coconut fibre thatches. These roofs gave shade to a patch of earth in front of the hut, making it a sort of verandah. Their progress led them down a narrow alleyway between walls that were made of sun-dried mud which was cracked and fissured with age as though someone had spent a lifetime doodling on them.

"What makes any man work for another?" Patience retorted. "It is not the expectation of gain?"

"What can anyone gain in this case?"

"I don't know. No one does."

They turned towards a doorway in the wall and Patience pushed it open. It led into a small courtyard where the floor was of a lighter colour mud than the buildings around it so that it glared brilliantly up at them reflecting the morning sunlight.

There were three men sitting in the shade of the thatch. Ajua's father, the ex-chief, was a thin man with a high forehead that curved upwards to a closely knit helmet of black hair which he seemed to be wearing on the back on his head. His linguist was a much heavier man who was deliberate in both manner and speech. He had the habit of turning his head sideways so that he always looked at people out of the corners of his eyes. The third man was one of the chief's relatives and was much older than either of his companions. As he sat on the ground, his elbows resting on his raised knees, his hands were hung out in front of him as if to display the arthritic swellings of his wrists and finger joints.

The courtyard seemed overcrowded with five people in it, and Patience, after asking her husband's permission, left after she had greeted each of the men.

There followed a great deal of customary ritual as enquiries were made by the hosts and their guest about each other's health and the health of their families. Then the state of the weather and the way it had affected the people living in Sekodé and in Port St. Mary was also discussed. Next was the question of a new government tax on road vehicles and what effect it would have on the transport of salt and prawns to the towns and marketing centres. Finally, Quarshie learned that a neighbouring tribe had started growing rice in the swampland behind their lagoons and they discussed whether the Saysay should do the same thing. It was all a performance, an act supported by tradition, that was used to allow the three men to assess the newcomer and for him to make a judgement of them.

To Quarshie it soon became evident that the old man could not be expected to offer very much when the discussion reached the subject Quarshie had come to talk about. It was

the old man's courtyard they were using so he was attending the meeting because it would have been impolite for him not to do so.

The chief, Quarshie concluded, was more as Aba had described him than as Patience saw him. In Quarshie's view he was a gentle, rather ineffectual man who deserved respect for his honesty but not for his intelligence or for his power to command attention.

It was the linguist, whose name was Baduo, who interested Quarshie most. Behind his sleepy appearance and slow speech there seemed to be a man of acumen. Perhaps, Quarshie thought, the man was the real power; he was certainly the more formidable of the two men. Yet he could never, nominally, be the chief because he did not belong to the right family.

It was on the question of the theft of the stool that Quarshie finally turned the talk from the smoke screen of casual chatter to the reason for his visit to Sekodé. He asked whether the new owner of the stool was demanding that the usual rites relating to the transfer of the stool had to be performed.

"He would be insolent and ill-advised to make such a demand," Baduo replied. "There is enough bad feeling among the people without his pouring kerosene on the fire."

"Were you the one who discovered the theft?" Quarshie asked him.

"I was."

"Did you think immediately that the stool had been stolen, or did you think that there were other forces at work?"

Baduo looked uncomfortable and moved his rump on the hard wooden seat of his chair before he said, "You are a man educated in other ways of thought than those we are accustomed to. Do you believe in 'other' forces?" He was obviously sensitive and perhaps a little suspicious.

"I don't think anyone has ever proved anything either way. There is considerable evidence to show that there are happenings for which the science I have studied has, as yet, no answers."

"Would you say that small footprints, smaller than those which would be made by a newborn baby, would count as evidence that something has visited us?"

"You found footmarks like that outside the hut where the stool was kept?"

"Inside and at a distance from it but not leading up to the doorway where there were long smooth strips of ground as if someone had beaten the ground flat."

"It was dry inside the hut?"

Baduo nodded.

"And there had been rain?"

"Yes."

"Were all the footprints the same?"

"No. Some of them had sunk in more deeply than the others."

"But they were still quite deep? I ask because if whatever made them was no bigger than a baby it would not have been heavy enough to leave deeply impressed footmarks. What do you think made them?"

Baduo did not answer.

Quarshie changed the subject. "Were there," he asked, "or are there any people who feel that your judgements in court have injured them unjustly?" He addressed the question to the chief, who shrugged and replied, "Even the ancestors make bad judgements and there are those who are bitter against them."

"But is there anyone who might be looking for revenge?"

Baduo said, "There was one who spread his nets amongst the young prawns and took them before they were of a size to be taken. That man boasted that he would kill the man who gave judgement against him." Then he shook his head and added, "If this were the work of a revenge seeker, why would it affect the other villages? His actions would surely be directed against the Saysay Kamancha and his family."

"Are none of the people who have been killed here related to your family?" Quarshie again addressed the chief.

"Not one," he replied.

"Who are they?"

"There have so far been three women and one man."

"So far? You think there will be more?"

Baduo nodded.

"Why?"

"Because . . ." speaking like a man who is reluctant to commit himself he said, "Since the theft of the stool—yes, I am sure it was stolen—since then it would seem that the purpose of all the things which have happened here has been to create fear."

"And the same is happening in all the other villages, even the one which now possesses the stool?"

"It is happening in all places where there are Saysay."

"And the dead here? You were going to tell me about them. What kind of people were they and where were they found?"

The chief said, "The first was Adamansa. She was said to be a witch." Baduo took the statement further. "She, herself, claimed to have killed many of her relatives." Quarshie had learned from Mrs. Quarshie that, amongst the Saysay, witches could use their evil powers only within their own families. And, of course, African witches did not, in fact, commit murder; what a Saysay witch could do was to kill a person's soul, his *boro*. Then the person died of what foreigners saw as natural causes. The question which troubled Quarshie was always which came first, death by what a post-mortem would show to be an embolism or a stroke, or the witches' destruction of a person's *boro?* Did the spell cause heart failure? Or did the witch claim responsibility for the death after the fact? In most cases, Quarshie knew, cause and effect would be very difficult to establish with any scientific certainty.

"Adamansa was a very emotional woman," Baduo added. "One who could fall into a trance quite easily. She claimed, one evening, to have heard a voice speaking to her in her hut, where she lived alone, and she told her neighbours that she had been ordered to go around the lagoon to the circle of palms which surround one of the fishermen's fetishes. There she was told she would find a special charm which would

bring her peace and she should set out for the fetish as the moon came out of the sea. Her neighbours saw her leave. She did not, however, return and her body was found floating in the reeds a day or two later."

"And she was prepared for burial?"

"Yes."

"What is your custom, here, in preparing the dead for burial?"

"The body is cleaned and all that is not flesh, bone and blood and can therefore cause the body to swell is drawn away. Then every opening in the body is closed by being filled with fine grasses which swell when they get wet. Thus all the essences stay within the body and do not escape until the person reaches the ancestors. The hands and feet are also tied together so that they will not turn back towards this life, for there are those who fear to face the ancestors."

"Was she, or were any of the others, examined for any injury?"

"Only so far as this could be done without releasing any of the essences."

"You mean that none of the plugs were removed?"

"Yes."

Quarshie said, "It would be easy to kill a person by driving steel, or even pointed wooden spears up through the nose, or in through the ears. Then by blocking the nose and the ears nothing would show and there would be no blood. I am trying to account for the fact that the bodies are prepared for burial when you find them."

The old man said, "The spirits do not need to use wood or iron to kill. They have their own ways of doing such things."

"You could be right, father," Quarshie told him. He asked Baduo, "And the dreams, what about them?"

"No one knows. A person will lose himself. He will be there before you and not there. Sometimes he will show that he is filled with a great and terrible fear and sometimes he will seem to be filled with bliss."

"What starts the dreams? Or what do they follow?"

"No one knows."

"And the other three who were killed?"

"One had a farm and there was a tree on it where she used to sit and rest in the shade and it spoke to her. It told her to come to the farm that night because the spirit of the earth was pleased with her and wanted to reward her for taking such good care of the things which grew there. So she went."

"And was found there, the next day, dead?"

"She was."

"And the man?"

"He had a place by the sea where he used to mend nets for other fishermen. He was too old to fish anymore. In a corner of his hut there was a pile of nets and from them a voice spoke saying that the spirit of the lagoon was dissatisfied with the way the Saysay people were using the privilege that has been given them to fish in the waters of the lagoon. He was then ordered to come back alone at night and he would be told how men should fish so that the spirit would be appeased and would bless the fishermen with good catches. That was what he told his son when he came back to the house in the evening. It was true, too, that the fishing in the lagoon had not been good for some weeks. So he obeyed the voice and his body was found rolling in the edge of the sea the next morning."

"These voices speak out loud? They do not speak in people's heads?"

"It would seem that they speak aloud and in Saysay."

"And the fourth one who died?"

"Was but a child. A girl just coming to puberty. She was a little strange and would always go her own way—even when she went to fetch water from the river, she would not fetch it from the same place the others did but would go to some private place. No one knows if the voice spoke to her, or at what time she left the village except that it was night. When she was found to be missing her kin looked for her and found her at her place by the river. She was naked and dead. It was

rumoured, but her kin have never spoken about it, that she had been violated."

Quarshie, who was sitting on a low wooden stool, bent forward and drew some meaningless shapes in the dust beside his feet using his forefinger, as a thoughtful man might in other circumstances doodle on a piece of paper.

Presently the old man said, "The ancestors and the gods have turned against us because we have offended them."

"Have you asked the priests to talk with the spirits, father, to find out how you have offended them?"

Baduo said, "There are two priests here and the one contradicts the other. He who is of the Gunsu religion says that the ancestors are disturbed because what is happening is being done without their knowledge. The other, who is the priest of the river god and not truly of our people, says that the gods are angry and that we must be prepared to make great sacrifices to appease them."

"They do not say what you should sacrifice?"

Baduo shook his head.

"And you, what do you believe?" Quarshie was convinced that the linguist was a far more thoughtful man than either of the other two and directed his question at him, but the old man answered first.

He said, "Only the gods could make so much trouble and they would do it only to show that they are displeased with us."

The chief said, "I do not know what to believe. But I sleep very little at night and I hope very much that you can help us."

Following protocol, Baduo spoke last:

"I am also of two minds. There are things which I think I can understand because they have the mark of man-mischief on them—and there are others which I do not understand at all. If you will accept me, Dr. Quarshie, I would like to work with you on this thing, for there is no telling how far it may go if we cannot stop it."

CHAPTER SIX

. . . it was a crude representation of a woman being held down on her back by four men; another lay on top of her. . . . It was a message which needed no words to make its point.

"Why don't you talk to her?" Mrs. Quarshie asked. She wanted to talk with me but I found it difficult to understand what she was saying."

Quarshie looked down at his wife and felt that she was almost a stranger. She was barefooted, naked to the waist and sweating. On one hip she was supporting one of her sister's infants. As Quarshie was about to answer her she swung the baby around her hips, leant forward with the child astride her loins, whipped a cloth around it, fastened the cloth above her breasts with a quick expert twist of her wrist and stood upright again with the child riding comfortably.

Mrs. Quarshie had gotten out of the habit of being just another woman amongst many others and of having to carry her part of the work load of the village while the men, who were not fishing, sat around and watched their wives work. She had also, Quarshie thought, become too Westernised to fit easily into the surroundings that she had left when she was six or seven years old. At that age she had been sent to help in an uncle's house in Port St. Mary and it was he who put her through school. But now the strain of trying to be like her sisters was proving to be greater than she had thought it would be. And then the white anthropologist had tried to strike up an acquaintance with her and Mrs. Quarshie had

discovered that she could not meet her on equal terms either. Although she had left her black sisters behind, she had not caught up to the level of the Western academic and she therefore felt that she was nowhere, just drifting between the two.

However, the woman did seem to need help and Mrs. Quarshie did not particularly want her husband to join the men who sat around and gossiped while she and the other women worked.

"Go and talk with her, Quarshie," she told him. "Go on. Don't come hanging around me, here."

He went wordlessly in the direction in which she pointed.

The door of the room she'd directed him towards was closed and he knocked lightly.

"Who is it?" Linda asked in Saysay.

"Dr. Quarshie," he replied in English. "My wife said that you were asking for me."

"Yes, Doctor, yes. Forgive me, I'm . . . I'm not dressed. I was resting. I will be with you in a minute."

She was almost as good as her word. It certainly took her no more than two minutes and when she appeared she had not only put on an expatriate-style dress made of a thin cotton material, but had her hair loose, hanging down to her shoulders, and had had time to put a wet comb through it.

Quarshie was surprised to realise that she had a sort of stiff beauty. She saw the impression she made on him reflected in the way he looked at her and again, as it had been at their first meeting, she felt a sense of well-being.

She said, "It was nice of you to remember me. It's very hot to walk but my beach hut is only a little way. It would take us ten minutes. There will be more breeze out there. Could you bear to go that far?"

Quarshie said, "If it is where you would like to go."

"You are kind. I can't tell you how wonderful it is to speak my own language. My head and thoughts get sort of congested with Saysay. And then the vocabulary is not big enough to allow me to say the things I really want to say, so I am always looking for a Saysay word that is more exact than

the first one that comes into my mind and can never find it because it doesn't exist. How does one say 'traumatic,' for instance? Or 'platonic' or 'radical'?" And then, because she felt she must sound negative, she added, "Of course Saysay serves its purpose and that of its people perfectly. It's our fault, really, I suppose, because we complicate things so much."

They were on a footpath and she was walking in front of him. She was barefooted but carried herself with the same upright posture that usually marks people who have been brought up to carry things on their heads.

"Where did you learn to walk like that, Miss Albini?" Quarshie asked.

"Please call me Linda, Doctor. My father was an Italian who married a Russian emigré. He was in the wholesale vegetable business. My mother claimed to be of noble birth and she was ashamed of my father and his profession. Anyway, when I was small, she always made me walk about carrying encyclopaedias on my head so that I would walk 'like a princess'—which was what, according to her, I should have been if she had made the right marriage. It was only when I got out here that I realised that without meaning to she had given me something priceless; the way she had taught me to walk gave me a place in a true aristocracy. I'm talking too much but I can't believe that the words I hear are coming out in English. You were in North America, weren't you, Doctor?"

"Yes. Seven years in Montreal."

"Why that's no distance from my home town. Did you ever visit Burlington, Vermont?"

"I did," he replied. She was a full-bodied woman, Quarshie thought, not skinny like so many white women.

Their path had brought them to the edge of the lagoon and she stopped and faced him.

"What must you think of me for talking my head off like this? And the women here, what will they think? The men are even worse sticklers for etiquette than the women. Oh, dear, and now I sound like I'm running them down and I am not,

really I am not. Or rather"—she felt confused and inept in front of this unsmiling man—"it's not because they are black but perhaps a little because . . . well, I guess they are so far behind the rest of the world. Of course there are millions of white people who are probably even less developed. But when you grow, you have to change, don't you? And when you stop growing, pretty soon you start getting less, that is, you start dying."

She was looking up at him, barely aware of what she was saying, but shaking with the desire to touch him. She said, "My pulse is racing; feel it. I don't understand it. I don't understand anything. What's happening to me?"

Quarshie took her pulse and nodded gravely. Then he patted her hand and returned it to her. He said with his best bedside-manner smile, "You have been under a lot of stress. The fact that you can communicate with me more freely than you have been able to talk to anyone for a very long time has got you a bit worked up. It will pass and you will probably feel rather deflated afterwards. Perhaps it would help if we talked about some of the things which have put you under pressure."

He turned her around and took her elbow and she let it sink down—that's what it felt like, she told herself—into the palm of his hand. She would have liked to have let the whole of herself go with it because it gave her such a tremendous feeling of support.

More calmly she said, "Of course you are right. I have already demonstrated how much I need to talk. Now I need to talk sense. Where should I begin?"

"Let me ask some questions and perhaps that will help you."

"Yes, please. You ask the questions." I have faith in you, Dr. Quarshie, she wanted to tell him.

Quarshie, still speaking gravely, said, "Now, let's begin at the beginning. What made you come and choose to do your research here?"

"I guess the answer is in what I just said—these people are not growing. Their customs and traditions have, I guess, al-

most fossilised them. Flies in amber. We anthropologists can look at what is happening today and feel that there is a good chance that that is the way it has always been."

"And the—what do you call it?—culture shock, did that hit you very hard when you got here?"

She paused beside the bole of an uprooted palm. "Let's stop and sit here for a moment, Doctor. This is my favourite view. It was so peaceful when I came. The lagoon mirroring those red huts and palms along the shore and the fish traps out in front of them like a sort of careless scribble. Idyllic, I used to call it. Walden Pond revisited . . . African style." She sat down. "No, Doctor, no culture shock. Just relief at being able to get away from the rat race for a while. Besides, I've had training in doing this sort of thing." She paused and nodded. "Even university life is becoming a rat race. Competition, not contemplation, is what it's all about now . . . too many people after too few jobs and if you can't keep up . . ." She left the sentence unfinished.

Quarshie looked at her profile as she sat staring across the water and thought that perhaps her mother had really had some aristocratic blood in her veins. Linda, turning quickly, caught his speculative expression. She tried to read his eyes but he met her gaze coolly and she was eventually forced to drop her eyes and look down at his hands. Noticing that he was wearing an unusually wide gold ring, she reached over and took his hand, raising it so that she could see the ring more clearly. "That looks as if it might be old," she told him.

"It was made four hundred years ago," he said shortly and removed his hand from hers.

She looked up at his eyes and thought she saw hostility in them. She said impulsively, "I'm sorry. Did I do something wrong?"

The thought which crossed Quarshie's mind was that he had not come to Sekodé to waste his time with a hysterical white woman.

She sensed his reaction because she said, "I'm behaving badly, aren't I? I'm terribly jumpy. My feelings are all tied up

in a knot. And I guess there's self-pity involved with it all, someplace." She stood up. "We'd better walk on. If we go on sitting here, I . . ." She did not turn away quickly enough and Quarshie saw that there were tears in her eyes.

As he followed her he said, trying to give her the help he at last realised she needed, "I'm not, emotionally, in much better shape than you are. I'm suffering from culture shock even if you are not. I'm a city boy who has come back to the farm and I know I don't belong here. As you said, it's all a question of change. I have changed; they haven't. Linda . . . I understand your problem, or at least a part of it. You're not overreacting; I was. The ring has associations—I don't usually talk about them. A man I loved was shot and died in my arms and . . ." He wanted to say, "I killed another man to revenge his death," but the words would not come.

She waited for him to finish and when he did not she said, "I'm sorry. I did not mean to stir up anything." She turned and faced him again, wanting him, this time, to see the tears in her eyes. One of them spilled out and ran down over her cheekbone. "I'm afraid I am behaving in a very funny way for someone who feels happy, or at least happier than I've felt for all the weeks since this trouble started." She brushed the tear away and lifted her chin. "I felt terribly alone because I could not talk about my anxieties to anyone. Now you are here and I can talk to you. And you are here because of the troubles, aren't you?"

"Yes. Perhaps that is what we should talk about. Let's go to your hut. That must be it over there."

As they came to the entrance of the hut she stood aside with a gesture and said, "Welcome to my ivory tower, Doctor, I . . ."

They both saw the drawing at the same moment.

It was on a sheet of paper torn from the centre of a school exercise book so that it was double-page width. On it was a crude representation of a woman being held down on her back by four men; another lay on top of her while others

stood around watching. All the figures, except that of the woman, were shaded to show that they were black.

It was a message which needed no words to make its point.

It was pinned with thorns to the rear wall of the hut. Quarshie took it down, folded it and put it into his pocket.

"I may need that as evidence some time," he said, forcing his words to sound casual.

After a moment she produced two words: "Oh, God." They came from somewhere deep in her chest through a constricted throat.

He put his arm around her shoulders and she let herself sag against him. After a moment she turned her face sideways against his chest.

They stood like that for several seconds, Quarshie offering her support and sympathy while at the same time he ran over some obvious deductions in his mind. The drawing had to be the work of men, not spirits. It suggested, too, that whoever was responsible wanted perhaps, to be rid of Linda, which, in turn, meant that they might have something to fear from her, something they thought she knew about them, or something which might identify them. Perhaps he should put her on a bus and get her out of the area as quickly as possible.

Linda said quietly and quite coolly, "I'm glad you were with me when I found that thing. I don't know what I would have done if I had been alone."

Quarshie tightened his hold round her shoulders a little and said, "Your days for being alone, madame, are over. That is if you stay here."

"But of course I am going to stay here. There is something going on here that could be unique if I could get it down on paper. I don't know what it would qualify as, but I guess it couldn't be considered anthropology." She straightened up and moved away from him. Looking up, she said, "Thank you for that strong right arm and the comfort that came with it." And then in a different tone of voice: "I'm sure you must have realised that you are up against more than local witchcraft. My guess is that there is a gang involved. There has to be, be-

cause they keep hitting all over the place, not only in Sekodé, but in Senunwa, Seboda, Sekanasi and Sesoo as well. And now they want me out—and I bet they are going to want you out too, pretty soon, because—here's a theory for you—the games they are playing are not exclusively African. Someone has been gathering a few ideas from my famous civilization, like for instance the use of LSD or something of the same nature. That's where the weird dreams are coming from. I tasted some of the food one of the old women had had and fortunately I got back to my room and locked the door before I freaked out. Might that be something you would call a clue, Dr. Quarshie?" She looked at him with her head tilted to one side.

He smiled and her heart leapt to see that the man was not as solemn and forbidding as she thought. "You certainly have—is it *Doctor* Albini?"

"Sadly, no. What looks like it is slipping down the drain right now was to have been my doctoral thesis."

"That's too bad. Never mind, maybe there is something we, Mrs. Quarshie and I, could do to help you make up for whatever you are losing out on now—once we find just what is happening here."

And he put the idea of pressing her to leave out of his mind. She was going to be useful to him, he thought, and then realised, with a feeling of guilt, useful in a way that Mrs. Quarshie never could be. And he wondered how many black men with a Western education had felt the same way, in similar circumstances, about white women.

CHAPTER SEVEN

. . . every crime involves a criminal . . .

The Biliani lorry-park is the hub of the town. Its sides are enclosed by some fifty market stalls with loosely thatched roofs.

In most of the markets in the world it is the goods on display that give the scene its colour and interest. In Biliani, as elsewhere in West Africa, it is the people who catch one's attention. This is not only because of the brilliance of the clothing, but because of the spontaneity that expresses itself in torrents of words, the exuberance with which the men greet one another or, simply, the freedom which allows people to sleep — one stall keeper will be likely to have his head down on his arms, which rest on the back of a roughly made table that supports the goods. The articles on sale may be cans of condensed milk or cloyingly perfumed talcum powder, acrid smoked fish or bicycle bells, mangoes or local herbalist and imported patent medicines. They may include hundreds of other items from beads to khaki shorts and from local yams and palm oil to canned sardines from Portugal.

Many of the women will carry babies on their backs or have them scrambling around their feet, with a few cowed and scrawny dogs and ubiquitous and equally scrawny chickens.

When Quarshie, Linda, Arimi, and Ajua arrived on the tro tro from Sekodé there was another element in the market that would only be noticed by someone who knew that it had no place in it. Sprinkled around in twos and threes were men who took no part in the activities but spoke to each other in

low voices and watched everything that moved except the smallest of the children, the dogs and the chickens. It was Ajua who pointed them out to Quarshie, explaining that they were newcomers.

Quarshie and Linda each had a different reason for visiting Biliani. After considering the little he had learned about events in Sekodé, Quarshie had decided to call on the local district officer and the chief of police to see what information they had been able to obtain. Linda, while she had adapted her tastes very well to the food served in Aba's compound, found that there were essentials which she could not do without such as dried or canned milk, coffee and cookies—the latter she shared with the village children.

Arimi and Ajua, whom it seemed to be hard to separate, had come along partly for the ride and partly in case anyone needed Ajua's help as an interpreter. As long as she was with Quarshie it was evident that she chose to ignore, or to consider as baseless, her fears of the mana'kpoi.

"Have you seen these men here before?" Quarshie asked Linda.

"Yes, they have been around for several weeks. They watch me very closely while I'm shopping and I think they follow me."

"Are they hostile in any way?"

"Not really. Though I feel that they might be if I did something they did not like."

"Might they be plain-clothes police, sir?" Arimi asked.

"Something like that, perhaps. Look, why don't you play a little game with them? Ajua and Linda are going shopping. You start out with them, then split away. If the men continue to follow Linda, which they probably will, then you come round behind and follow them. Afterwards you can tell me everything you saw—who else they met and talked with, for instance, or whether they seemed to try to get close enough to hear what Linda and Ajua were talking about. Or how the people in the street regard them. I'll meet you all at that place

over there"—he pointed across the lorry-park—"where they sell beer in about an hour and a half. And be careful, all three of you, just as a matter of principle."

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The district officer's name was Joyboy Lewis. In a previous government, sometime before the military had taken over in Akhana, he had held a cabinet post. That government had forced the Army to stage the fairly recent *coup d'état* because it had been the all-time most corrupt administration. Joyboy had been Minister of Health and Welfare so that he and Quarshie had met before. During his tenure there had been suspicions that some of the drugs which passed through the hands of the ministry had been adulterated to increase their bulk and then put on the open market at the price of the pure article. Quarshie's efforts and those of other doctors to prove that this kind of evil mischief was taking place were foiled, it had been said, at the ministerial level by Joyboy himself.

"Well," he said when Quarshie entered his office, "if it isn't the big man himself."

Joyboy was small, fat, bland, had a cherubic smile and, unusual in an African, long sideburns that he dyed an intense black along with what was left of his hair, which was deeply indented by the horseshoe-shaped extension of his forehead.

"So what brings you to the bush from the delights and profits of the big city, Doctor?"

He had obviously made lavish use that morning of a highly perfumed after-shave lotion and the hand which he offered Quarshie was as soft as a woman's and equally well manicured.

"A visit to my mother-in-law." The two men met as Westerners—Joyboy held a degree in business administration from some obscure university in the U.S.A.—and not as villagers, so they could dispense with the formalities of African-style greetings.

"And you are calling on me as a matter of diplomatic eti-

quette? Or is there something I can do for you? Please sit down."

The room had an air conditioner and for a senior administrator's office it was comfortably though not elaborately furnished.

"Cigarette?" He offered Quarshie a hand-carved mahogany box.

"Thank you, I don't smoke. And yes, of course, I am paying my respects as one should when visiting an unfamiliar district as a stranger."

Joyboy took a cigarette and lit it with an ornate desk lighter.

"Good, good," he said, between puffs of smoke, "and . . . ? I am sure there must be another reason."

Quarshie shrugged. "Yes, there is, but of course I am reluctant to . . . to involve myself with things which are really none of my business."

"If there were more people around here with those feelings the life of a D.O. would be much easier. So what am I doing that I should not be doing?" The smile was more cherubic than ever.

Quarshie shook his head. "Oh no, I am here only to get information, if it is available, not to pass judgements. As I told you, I am visiting my mother-in-law. She lives in Sekodé."

Joyboy nodded. "We knew you were there." And then as if to cover up a statement he shouldn't have made he added, "A man of your importance, a friend of the President's, does not make many moves which go unobserved. In fact, we often get the feeling that any moves you make will show the way the wind is blowing in official circles."

"You overestimate my importance."

"I don't think so. You are a man, Doctor, to be respected."

And watched? Quarshie did not say the words but they passsed through his mind. Instead he asked, "How well do you know the Saysay people? You are not of them yourself, are you?"

"No, my people have always been at loggerheads with

them. Throughout history the Saysay, with their lagoons and fish and salt, were rich. We, with our mangrove swamps and mosquito-infested hinterlands, have always been poor. The only thing we have more of than they do is malaria. We tend to view them as a hard obstinate people who, too often, had their bellies full when our bellies were empty."

"But now you are the boss."

The cherub beamed. "That is a rather harsh way of putting it."

"You know, of course, that there are things happening in their villages that one might describe as abnormal."

"I would not describe them that way—not at all. I would say"—he picked his way with care—"that they are a manifestation of the dark side of our African culture. Witchcraft, Doctor."

"Uninfluenced by human interference?"

"Dr. Quarshie, you surprise me. A man of your training and experience should know that it is almost impossible to draw a line between human and religious influences in society. Even the white man, when he wanted to get at the wealth in West Africa, convinced himself that it was his spiritual mission to convert the heathens, who were sitting on far more wealth than they needed, to a love for the white man's god who would assure them riches in heaven." Joyboy fiddled with his lighter for a moment and then added, "You are right, the Saysay are having troubles. They are due to what, I believe, historians call an internal power struggle."

"And there is nothing you can do to help them resolve their difficulties?"

"Me? Doctor, I have been in politics for a long time. In all those years there is one lesson which I have learned the hard way—never, as an outsider, get into the middle of a family squabble."

There was a knock on a door which Quarshie presumed led into Joyboy's secretary's office.

With an apology he got up and opened the door a little way. For several moments he carried on a conversation with a

woman who was out of Quarshie's sight. They spoke in low voices so that he could not hear what was being said. But he could see her hand on the doorjamb: her fingernails were painted scarlet, she wore a gold ring, not unlike his own, on her fourth finger, and the nail of her little finger was unnaturally long.

Presently Joyboy joined the woman in the next office and closed the door behind him. When he returned he made no further apology but sat down saying, "Where was I? Ah, I know, family squabbles. Another lesson that I have learned, Doctor, a bitter one, is not to tangle with spiritual leaders when they claim to be speaking for the ancestors, or the gods. Get mixed up with them and it's like diving headfirst into a thick patch of camel thorn."

"Have you had any actual reports on what has been taking place in the Saysay villages? Four people have been killed in Sekodé alone."

"My reports said that they died, not that they had been killed. And that their deaths were due to witchcraft."

"You mean that spirits can tie up people and prepare them in the traditional manner for burial?"

"I have been convinced on occasions of the spirits' capability to do many more miraculous things than that."

"Have the police investigated any of these reports of death and what seems to me to be an organised program of intimidation?"

"Really, Doctor! Are you suggesting that we send men to look into reports of voices coming out of trees and curious little subhuman footprints—you see, we do know what is going on. No, the Saysay are a difficult, pig-headed tribe who disown their people if they join the government services, or the police, so we have no Saysay men we can send down there to investigate. And if we sent any of our men we should be inviting a riot. They are just going to have to get out of this without any help from us."

His eyes danced with delight as he added, "Ah, but you are visiting your mother-in-law. So you have married into the clan

—which surely explains your concern, doesn't it? Of course, Mrs. Quarshie is behind this, isn't she? My sympathy, sir, is all on your side. The driving force of a determined woman—a Saysay, no less—must make it impossible for you to do anything other than what you are doing. Well, well . . . one lives and learns . . . every Samson has his Delilah."

"And in my experience, Mr. Lewis," Quarshie retorted coldly, "at the risk of being obvious, I would say that every crime involves a criminal. And I think you know as well as I do that what is happening in Sekodé involves what my *relatives by marriage*"—he emphasised—"call man-mischief and for reasons which are not clear to me at the moment, you are finding excuses for not taking the action you should be taking." Quarshie spoke angrily, something he did very seldom.

Joyboy's cherubic smile was back again. He said, "There you are, you see. When I suggested that you had come to tell me that I was doing something that I should not be doing, I was only a tiny bit off target. What you really came to tell me was that I was not doing something I *should* be doing." The smile disappeared. He got up and said, "I have some business to attend to in my other office, Doctor. If you want to sit here and think over what I have said I believe you will find that I have been reasonable enough. If you want to leave, the door is just behind you—but take a couple of thoughts with you. I am responsible for law and order in a district containing almost half a million people. If you interfere with the way I undertake my duties even the President himself will not be able to prevent you from being brought to trial before the local courts charged with encouraging tribal factionalism—which is something, as you know, our good President is always trying to discourage. In the past, I believe, you have always been *invited* to make any investigations you have undertaken by the locally responsible authorities. As the head of the authorities here, I forbid you to undertake any investigation because I do not believe your knowledge of local affairs qualifies you to meddle in what is a very delicate political situation, one which could blow up into a serious threat to the peace and stability

of my district. Good day, sir." And Joyboy Lewis made a firm, quiet and well-timed exit.

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At the police station, where Quarshie went to discuss the same subject with the local superintendent of police, the confrontation—at the physical level, at least—was different. It would have been difficult for anyone, seeing the two men together, to say which was the more massive, though the superintendent carried rather more weight in fat than Quarshie did.

There was, however, none of the pretence of cordiality in the way the superintendent greeted Quarshie that there had been at his meeting with the D.O. After Quarshie was ushered into the man's office the superintendent appeared not to notice him but continued to read a report, leaving Quarshie standing, waiting. Eventually he looked up briefly, said, "Good morning" and returned to his reading.

It was a game, Quarshie decided, that two could play.

He made his move by repeating those same two words and then walking to the window, where he stood, wordlessly, looking out into the sunlight outside. Deliberately he concentrated on the street in front of him.

The activity there was normal enough. The townsmen and -women were fetching and carrying water from a stand pipe which was out of view up the street. The sun blazed back at him off the whitewashed walls of a store that, like the market, carried a conglomeration of goods in which food, clothing, hardware, books and jewellery were displayed together. Just outside the row of doorways, which gave onto the store's shady interior, a woman squatted in the sun on the sidewalk fanning a coal pot that bore plantains, spread out on a wire grill, roasting over the glowing charcoal; a goat came into the picture and tested some of the cast-away plantain skins with its prehensile lips; a very raggedly dressed man, moving his thin legs in short staggering steps, passed by carrying an enormous headload of baled skins; to the left of the store two little

girls clapped their hands and danced facing each other, one variation of a game in which a simple pattern of footwork has to be followed and the objective is for the leader to fault her companion by changing the pattern in such a way that the other fails to repeat it.

Quarshie's shoulders bulked in the window frame and the superintendent decided to modify his approach. Pushing his papers to one side, he cleared his throat and asked, "May I know why I am being honoured with a visit from you, Doctor? I am a busy man and . . . please, won't you sit down?"

Quarshie turned to face him but he did not move over to the proffered chair, preferring to rest on the ledge and thus, with the light behind him, to look down upon the police officer.

"I have already visited Mr. Lewis," he told the superintendent, "and I have discussed this matter with him. May I ask you if you have an extra-large contingent of plain-clothes police out on the streets at the moment?"

"Ask you may, Doctor. But I do not have to answer unless you have some authority to make such enquiries. You see, Mr. Lewis sent a message saying that he has forbidden you to continue your investigation here because it could increase our troubles."

"What kind of troubles?"

"The usual kind that police have to deal with."

"Murder, for instance."

"When it occurs, yes."

"But you don't have any investigations into murder on your files now?"

The superintendent shook his head. "If I answer your question I shall be encouraging your investigation, whatever it may be. You must know that neither I nor my subordinates can discuss any matter with unauthorised persons."

"I see I shall have to return to Port St. Mary, then, to obtain the required authorisation, shan't I?"

"That would not be clever, Doctor. You might force me to arrest you on suspicion of concealing evidence in a case I

have under investigation. I might have to arrrest your wife and son, also, because they too know of the evidence."

"What evidence?"

"Your talking with that white woman, for example, and every conversation you have with influential people must be turning up information that should be in my hands. No, Doctor, your position is not a good one in the eyes of the law."

Quarshie looked down at the man leaning back in his chair. To an outside observer neither of them would have appeared to have any hostility—they would have looked like two men discussing a problem which was of no more than academic interest to either of them.

At the end of a long silence Quarshie said, "You have an interesting situation to deal with, don't you, Superintendent? You are involved in the kind of case in which, at this point you must have realised, you will be hanged—metaphorically, of course—if you co-operate with me and hanged if you don't. Once it gets around that those whose job it is to uphold the law are using it to satisfy their own ends, then you will be in trouble."

The superintendent shook his head. "I don't know what you are talking about. I am sure that none of the judges in the criminal cases on which you have worked so far have accepted bluff and guesswork as evidence. So please, Doctor, go back to Sekodé, relax, be happy with your fishing people"—the superintendent sat up abruptly and slapped the top of his desk with his hand—"and leave the investigation of crime to those who make it their profession." He looked at his watch and added, "Now I must make my daily round of the prison cells. I hope never to see you inside of one of them."

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Quarshie ordered two quart bottles of beer. The fact that both the men he had just seen had gone out of their way to warn him off his task convinced him that he must stay with it. If they were bluffing then he would find out why and call their bluff.

A little later, he called for his third bottle of beer and he saw Linda and Ajua coming across the lorry-park towards him. As Linda passed them he saw that people turned and stared and he wondered if she felt as he had when he visited a small community in rural Quebec where no one had ever seen a black man before. It had been during his last year as an intern in a Montreal hospital and it had been in the depths of winter. He had been wearing a parka with a white fur-lined hood, and this, his size and the fact that he was there as a temporary replacement for a doctor who had gone on vacation had caused the inhabitants of the surrounding villlages to consider him as a djinn.

With Linda there must have been some townfolk who felt the same way, though she would not have been the first white woman most of them had seen. It was her long chestnut-coloured hair and the fact that she walked and dressed like an African that would be what provoked the most discussion. He had to concede that she carried herself well under such intense scrutiny.

Shortly after Linda and Ajua joined him, Arimi and two local boys detached themselves from the crowd. When he reached Quarshie, Arimi said, "Please, sah, make you go dash me tree benni. Dissum my frien' hea, all two, go help me too much. Make I go tell 'um go come dis place n' I go catchum chop, one time."

Quarshie gave the boy the money and he at once led the other two off to one of the market stalls where he bought them patties of fermented corn which were covered with a peppery hot sauce made of smoked fish and pimentos and were served on pieces of banana leaf. From what followed, though they were out of earshot, it was evident that Arimi took a ceremonial farewell before he returned to the cafe.

"What was that about?" Quarshie asked as he gave him a bottle of locally made cola.

"You told me to get information, sir."

"And?"

"I made friends with those two boys. They wanted to know

who Linda was and why I was with her. I told them. They wanted to know what it is like to live in Port St. Mary, they wanted to know what aeroplanes looked like when you got close to them and they wanted to know if you were really Dr. Quarshie. All the time we talked we followed the men who were following Linda and I asked a few questions. Softly, softly, you know, sir—as if they were things which just came into my mind by chance. I asked who the men were and they told me that they were from Port St. Mary. Later I asked why the men were following Linda and they told me that they watch every stranger in the town. They said the men are not policemen, sir, and they are not liked by the people of the town. The men never got very close to Linda, but they watched her very carefully. Now that we have bought them food those boys will be watching for me the next time that I come and I am sure that they will want to be my friends again."

Quarshie put his hand on Arimi's shoulder and squeezed it. He said, "That was a good morning's work. You did well." He paused, then he added, "The information that you and I got today is disturbing. How about you, Linda? Did you get what you came for?"

She nodded. "I get a kind of creepy feeling being followed like that And it is not just being stared at; I can take that. But those men are sinister."

"But you still want to stay?"

She looked at him gravely saying, "Yes, my curiosity has been aroused."

He said, in case she had not meant exactly what she had said, "I am sorry Mrs. Quarshie did not come along with us today. She is very clever at interpreting things. Anyway, we must get back to Sekodé. There's our tro tro over there."

The driver, however, told them that he was not leaving for several hours, and that there was a Volkswagen bus going soon and he pointed to an empty one standing nearby.

As they sat down in the comparatively comfortable seats Ajua said, "They don't usually run buses like this to Sekodé."

By the time the implication of her words hit Quarshie it was too late. The driver and a full complement of passengers materialised and at once the bus was on the move. All the passengers were men and Quarshie thought that he recognised some of them as having been amongst the patrols from Port St. Mary.

Ajua said, "But this is not the road to Sekodé."

At that point one of the men said, "The girl is right. We have orders to take you to another place. In a little while we shall stop. You will get out and we shall tie your hands and cover your eyes. Do not fight with us. We are ten strong men." He spoke in the language of the Koro people from Port St. Mary so that only Quarshie and Arimi understood him.

Quarshie said, "You are a Koro. Why do you work for these people here?"

"I do not work for them. I work for"—the man caught himself—"for others."

"And where are you taking us?"

"If you were to know that we should not be putting covers on your eyes. Big man, it is best that you do not talk, only listen, and do what it is said that you should do."

"Are we in trouble?" It was Linda's question in English.

"I am afraid so." Quarshie told her what had been said.

She closed her eyes, remembering, with a shiver, the picture they had found on the wall of her hut.

The Volkswagen turned into a thick piece of bush on the roadside and the man who had spoken to Quarshie, who was evidently the boss, told them to get out.

"Where we are going no one may wear any cover above the waist. Tell the white woman that."

Quarshie told Linda, adding, "You know what that might mean, I suppose?"

"That we shall be visiting some religious place."

"Yes, or at least I hope so."

Linda complied, apparently without embarrassment, and Quarshie felt relieved. So many white women would have made futile protests out of feelings of what he considered idi-

otic prudery. He had, therefore, been ready to explain that only Northerners, and particularly Americans, had sensationalised the idea that female mammary glands had a great erotic significance. While to Africans, mammae were of no greater importance, from the point of view of sexual stimulation, than the udders of a cow.

Watching Linda carefully, as the men took his wrists and tied them behind his back and then did the same with the other three, he saw an expression of rigid calm on her face that he knew she was forcing. Ajua was undisguisedly terrified while Arimi was watching his uncle and managing with a great effort to imitate Quarshie's look of remote disinterestedness.

Before they put a blindfold on him Quarshie eyed the members of the gang, staring meaningfully at each of them, and said, "My friends, if a hand is laid on the woman or on the girl and it is done without respect you had better take care to kill me, for if I see it, or hear of it and I live, I will find the man who did it and make certain that he goes to his grave regretting it."

To which one of the men responded by saying, "The dog on a chain barks more fiercely than one which is free."

Then Quarshie's eyes were covered and, with a sly look at his companions, the same man reached out and rolled one of Linda's nipples between his finger and his thumb and unexpectedly received a blow across the side of his face which knocked him off his feet. The blow was delivered by the first man who had spoken, and while the others guided their captives back into the bus he stood over his victim as if daring him to stand up and return it. The man on the ground made no move; instead, he put the palms of his hands together and held them up in a gesture of supplication.

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Twenty minutes later Quarshie and his companions were again made to get out of the bus. This time, after being walked a little way, they were forced to kneel and bend for-

ward until their foreheads touched the ground. Then the blindfolds were removed.

Someone spoke from behind them and it was Ajua who made the translation. She said, "The one who is behind us says that we should turn around. He has addressed me by name."

They found that they were facing an elderly priest with a dozen elders and women spread out on each side of him. Quarshie and his companions were kneeling in the centre of a large circle of packed mud with, on all sides, a thick tangle of secondary growth made up of small trees, shrubs and bushes. The chief priest, who wore a simple white robe and was bare-headed, sat with his acolytes between the buttresses of a silk cotton tree with its long silver trunk stretching up a hundred and thirty feet or more to a comparatively small pyramid of leafy boughs at its summit.

The priest said, as Ajua translated, "You are brought here in shame as prisoners to hear the words of Uwega, whom you have offended. The words were spoken to me this morning. He wishes you to know that those who try to undo His work must be prepared to die for He is impatient with such people and He will treat them as a woman treats chicken droppings on the floor of her hut—by sweeping them up and throwing them on the midden."

At this point, Quarshie noticed the woman sitting at the extreme right end of the priest's retinue. She was staring at him and there was an insolent, even contemptuous, look in her eyes. At once he noticed the feature which made her stand out so blatantly: she was wearing lipstick. At the next moment, as she put her hand up to her throat, he received a shock. The nail on her little finger was unnaturally long and she was wearing a wide gold ring on the fourth finger. It was the same ring, nail and hand that he had seen only a couple of hours earlier in Joyboy's office. Now he also saw that her arms were loaded with bracelets.

The priest was still talking about the power of Uwega had to punish those who offended Him and the dangers of taking

action that might cause Him to curse them. Ajua choked on several occasions because the words were so fearful. But Quarshie was no longer anxious about there being any danger to Linda and Ajua. This was the third phase of the day's warnings, and they were all for him.

Joyboy, presumably, wanted to keep as many options open as possible in case he wanted to stop Quarshie, literally, dead in his tracks. So, it seemed, since the woman wearing the lipstick must be in league with Joyboy, that it was the district officer who was behind the man-mischief. But that could not be right, either, Quarshie thought. The gang who had brought them to the Sacred Grove was not, if their boss was to be believed, working for anyone on the Biliani area. So there was someone else. But why and what was it all for?

A plump, naked girl of thirteen or fourteen came and stood in front of each of them holding a bowl of holy water and a leafy bunch of twigs. She slapped each of them in the face two or three times with the twigs after they had been dipped in the water. It was an action, according to the translation which Ajua continued, that absolved them of the crimes they had committed against Uwega. And, in effect, "Go and sin no more" were the words used at the end of the priest's peroration.

Then they were told to face the centre of the circle of earth and to kneel with their heads on the ground. They were blindfolded a second time, dragged to their feet and returned to the bus.

After nearly half an hour's drive, still blindfolded and bound, they were pushed out of the vehicle, which, from the sound of the engine, raced away down the road.

By standing back to back with her, Quarshie was able to untie Linda's hands and they were all soon free. Only then did the fact that Linda's breasts were uncovered become an embarrassment to her. It was Ajua who thought of tying the blindfolds together to make a halter.

Quarshie had money in his pocket so they were able to stop

another tro tro—they had been set down beside a busy road —and get back to Sekodé.

There, only Mrs. Quarshie, Baduo and old Aba were given the real story; the others were told that they had been robbed and Arimi and Ajua were forbidden to talk of their experiences to anyone.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Don't these men die when you use a knife or a gun on them?"

Jo Jo Sugar Ray Weston said, "You're good to me, baby."

It was an uncharacteristic statement. Generally, no one was good who played any part in his life or, more exactly, they were never good enough. The performance of anyone who did anything for him, especially if he was paying for it, always had to improve. This applied to everyone—except Ruby.

He would have been surprised to learn that she did not feel the same way about him. She was, perhaps, a little afraid of him but she used him just as unhesitatingly as she used everybody and she did not waste time worrying about whether he was good for her. She looked hard at what her instincts told her to do and then got on with the job.

Jo Jo stretched. He had the whipcord strength of a greyhound, one of his women had told him, and he had abused her a little physically (which she had liked) for saying that he reminded her of a dog.

"So," said Jo Jo, "now, tell me again about that dude, that doctor, and give it to me nice and slow. What has he got going there running around with that grey chick?"

"I don't know. But he certainly looks like he might be getting in our way."

"So you fixed him?"

"I think so."

"Think, baby? You mean he's still around?"

Ruby sighed and said, "How many times have I got to tell you, Sugar, that you can't do things here like in Bed Stuy?"

"Why? Don't these men die when you use a knife or a gun on them?"

"He's too well known, Sugar. But we really have him bottled up."

She started to laugh. "We took the famous doctor and the white woman and his son and a little Saysay girl to the Sacred Grove just outside Biliani. On the way they were driven around quite a bit to make them think it was some place way out in the bush. They had blindfolds on. Then they all had to strip to the waist and one of the priest's assistants asked me if all American women had brown skin and white tits. But what was really funny was seeing the famous doctor on his knees with his forehead on his ground and his ass in the air. That's what we were looking at, and I tell you, Sugar, there's nothing like that view of the big and the powerful to correct the feeling anyone might have that they are something special."

"So is that going to make him stay the hell out of our business?"

"That bit in the Sacred Grove won't, but Joyboy and the police will be taking care of it. If he makes a wrong move, or any move at all, they've got it all lined up so they'll have him in jail fast—and his wife and son with him."

"They can do that? Jesus. I couldn't move that fast in Paterson."

Paterson. Home was a long way away and despite the things he could buy, only Ruby really measured up to the way it had been back there—even though here you could buy the whole police force and the administration, too. And even if he could outdress everyone in the neighbourhood and dazzle the kids so that they stopped playing to gaze after him, even if—but there weren't enough "even ifs," that was the trouble. There never would be unless he changed his style and joined the local establishment—he was thinking seriously about doing that, but wasn't quite ready for it yet. There weren't

enough "even ifs" to make him forget something as simple as the smell of the asphalt up on Cranberry Hill around Ninth Street where he had learned to hustle. It was a fact that the asphalt didn't smell the same in Port St. Mary. Smells were important. It was hotter here but nobody smelt like the tired, sweaty, worn-out old men who used to shuffle home from washing dishes in some cafe down on Jefferson Boulevard. In fact, there weren't any familiar smells at all in Port St. Mary except that of stale urine. The predominant smell was always of herring being smoked down along the shore, which was unfamiliar but pervasive. It was as if most of the odours were bleached out of the atmosphere by the hot sun.

And then there had been the cool excitement of running numbers for Woody Williams in and out of the dark hallways thick with the old, old smell of generations of people—there was none of that here. The life which surged through those mean, dirty streets was in his blood. Nothing that went on here was in his blood. People had black skins and that was where the likeness between him and them ended.

However, he was not about to quit. When he went back he wanted Chuck to call him "Mr. Weston" because he was the president of Akhana Frozen Foods Incorporated. That was his ambition, that was what his money and his organising abilities were going to get him.

He was up on one elbow looking down at Ruby and he said, "Where would I be without you, baby? Taking care of everything and doing all the worrying."

Ruby put her hand up—the one Quarshie had seen twice the previous day—crawling her fingers up the nape of Jo Jo's neck and into his hair.

She told him, "Leave it that way, huh? And come back to me, Sugar, c'mon . . . stop worrying about how to deal with Dr. Quarshie. I am buying men for you to take care of that. When and if it becomes necessary they will make him disappear."

CHAPTER NINE

He had been killed with a large fish hook . . .

Quarshie had just finished a rudimentary autopsy on the man who lay on the ground in front of him and it had revealed a simple but startling fact: though the man's body had been discovered in the deepest recesses of one of the nets which lined a fish trap, the man had not died by drowning. He had been killed with a large fish hook which had been heated, straightened out and expertly driven between a couple of ribs just to the left of the man's sternum so that it had perforated his heart. All that had been left showing of the hook was the eye by which it would have been attached to the snood. Evidently the net had been hauled out secretly, the body inserted into the bunt and then the net had been re-set.

This time the corpse had not been prepared for burial though it was necessary for the funeral to take place immediately because the man had been dead for several days.

Because he had had things to discuss with Baduo, Quarshie did not arrive at the graveside until most of the ceremonial was over. However, the final phase which he did witness interested him because it was unique with the Saysay people. The dead man's widows planted the grave with the seeds of his favourite vegetables and watered them with palm wine. After that, for many weeks, the widows would take turns watering the small mound of earth over the grave, which was located in the corner of a field that regularly produced a good harvest. When the seeds germinated and eventually bore seed themselves (taking their life, it was said, from the marrow of the

man's bones) it was seen as a sign, since the wind would carry the seeds far and wide, that death was simply another form on life.

That afternoon Quarshie told his wife, "There are some who still insist that the man's death was due to witchcraft, though Baduo is not one of them. During enquiries which I asked him to make he found that the man left his compound three days ago saying that he would be gone for a week. He had said he was instructed to go to Sebodo by the ancestors to meet a certain Kuofo, who had important information for him. On the way he was to sleep in the reeds at a certain place which he knew. There he would be given more details about the visit. The ancestor came to him while he was splitting green coconuts and spoke to him out of a pile of husks. That's all anyone knows."

"Do you believe that a witch could kill him with a straightened-out fish hook?" Mrs. Quarshie asked.

"I suppose that some kind of autosuggestion might have caused him to try to commit suicide, but to drive a thing with a barb on it right into his own heart, no. It was murder."

"So what do we do now, Quarshie?"

"There is nothing we can do without help from the police but they, it seems, are on the other side. So I must go back to Port St. Mary and see what Uncle Tee Ama can do to help. He might suggest that we go and see Colonel Jedawi."

"But didn't the police superintendent tell you to stay here?"

"So?" responded Quarshie. "If we stay we are helpless. That is the way somebody wants it to be. If we go and he finds a way to stop us . . ." Quarshie shrugged.

"So we shall go." Mrs. Quarshie spoke with finality. "How?"

"We'll get a taxi. Or rather, I will get Baduo to get us a taxi. We don't want them to work another trick on us."

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The Saysay tell enquirers that the *tsomo tsoso* "come like the wind," which is not to say that they come quickly but that

they appear without being seen. The *tsomo tsoso* are the most powerful of the Saysay gods. *Tsoso* is the Saysay word for something which can work but is invisible; *tsomo* has the effect of adding the word "super."

These "supergods" are not associated with any kind of icon such as idols or fetishes, though they are sometimes related to some prominent feature of the countryside—for instance, a lake, river or mountain. Even then it is the abstract idea of the river or mountain which is worshipped. The gods could, however, have face-to-face meetings with their supplicants when both would assume identifiable human forms.

The priests of these gods are simply the means by which others can make contact with the gods whose judgements they interpret and whom they serve.

When the tsomo tsoso make spirit appearances to privileged followers, those whom they contact are not regarded as saints but merely as persons of unusual wisdom or, sometimes, simply as tools. Very few people are favoured in being able to contact the tsomo tsoso at will, only those with recognisably mediumistic powers, the old Aba was one of them.

She always insisted, however, that her reasons for making a contact had to be exceptional. If she bothered the gods over trivialities, they would take her gift away from her. It was this power of hers which she meant to pass on to Ajua that had made her tell the child that she would one day have an important role to play in the village.

The problems of the Saysay came into the category of important enough for her to approach the god whom she considered to be the most powerful of all. Now that Quarshie had told her that he agreed with her that the trouble was due to man-mischief she decided to ask the gods for their help.

Nyampong was nearest to the most sacrosanct and powerful of all, the omnipotent Klolo, who could not be approached at all by mortals and even had to be in a good humour to listen to the ancestors. But Nyampong could be reached and would usually listen. He headed the hierarchy of powers who dealt with the natural elements, the wind, rain, thunder, lightning,

fire and earthquakes. When she met him, old Aba told Quarshie, it was always on the shore—though, in fact, her body never left her room.

The god was very, very tall, Aba told Quarshie, as she rested her dry old hand on her son-in-law's forearm, even taller than he was and he always came wearing bells and red feathers from a parrot's tail around his legs and arms with the feathers spreading downwards like a ruff beneath his knees and over his elbows.

On this occasion Nyampong had spoken ambiguously—a habit Quarshie had noted with gods of all religions who made apocalyptic statements—about his supplicant's son-in-law.

According to Aba, the god had said, "The road your son must travel runs through much shadow and sometimes the shadow is very deep. But those who have faith in the powers of the gods and in themselves will negotiate the hazards successfully though not without fear and pain . . . for death, like a viper beside a path, lies ever in wait. Those who follow this road should carry with them *kizi uzi* seed, which the Dogon hold to be the original essence of life because, as it quickens and bursts its sheath, its force reaches beyond the stars. Only the force of the word of Klolo is greater." Looking at Quarshie earnestly with her faded eyes, the old woman added, "That was what he told me, my son, and I have a few of the kizi uzi seeds. So you will carry them with you . . . you, Prudence, the boy and the white woman."

Nyampong had said, in effect, that Quarshie was taking the right course but he had cautioned him. Now Aba said, "It will not only take great courage but a subtle and cunning mind. For those who are against you, for whatever reason, have the same and it takes a spider to outwit a spider." According to local legends, the spider is capable of visiting a ferocious revenge on those who do it harm—forcing them to bring about their own downfall.

"I will do the best I can, Mother," Quarshie told her.

"And you will carry the kizi uzi? I feel that Nyampong's

advice does not mean as much to you as it does to me but you must allow an old woman the comfort it will give her to know that you are in the care of the gods. Look, I have put a few grains in each of four small bags with a leather thong on each one so that you can wear them around your necks."

"I will wear them, then, in that way."

"When you say it like that I need ask for no promise. It is in the words as you say them, my son."

****

The taxi, when it came for them, was a dilapidated vehicle that would have been retired to the local scrapyard in an industrialised country. The fenders were held to the rest of the body by baling wire. Inevitably, it rattled furiously on the washboard surface of the laterite track which led from the village to the main road. Beyond that the driver was flagged down and halted by four armed policemen.

A police sergeant approached the car, saluted Quarshie and said, "I get ordah, sah, mus' I escort you and all who be in the same car to the polis station in Biliani."

"We are not breaking the law. What are we charged with?"

"No charge, sah. Superintendent's ordahs."

Quarshie said, "This lady is an American citizen. If you subject her to false arrest it go make plenty trouble for you."

"Never make trouble for me, sah. Only for superintendent. Plenty man in polis station witness he give me dis ordah."

"Then I'll make trouble for you," said Mrs. Quarshie angrily, "I am midwife. I must go to hospital, Port St. Mary side, catch plenty women there with piccin trouble. One woman go to die because I never be there you go be killer."

The man remained unimpressed. "Not me, ma'a. Superintendent."

"And if we don't go?"

"We are four man, sah. You are one man, two women, one small boy. Too, all polis man have gun."

"And you have orders to shoot?"

"Sah," the sergeant said patiently, "I am told mus' bring

you to polis station. These my ordah. I am told take gun. Why I get gun when I no fit use 'um?"

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At the police station they were taken straight to their cells without the formality of being booked. Quarshie was put into a small cell by himself. It was divided by iron bars from the next one to it in which the other three were locked up.

The only furniture in the cells were sleeping mats, slop buckets and earthen pots for drinking water. The only windows were openings high up in the wall which were barred and narrow. The two cells were in an annexe of the main building and were reached by a corridor which had a blank wall on one side of it and the barred, open-fronted cells on the other.

There had been no conversation among the prisoners since they had been arrested because each of them was occupied with his own thoughts, an unrewarding occupation when they were all faced with the same unpromising situation. Confronted by overwhelming force, they could only worsen their situation by offering physical resistance.

For the first time in his life, sitting alone on the floor of his cell, Quarshie understood what it would be like to live in opposition to a total dictatorship in which every citizen's life was subject to the whim of an unprincipled man. The individual was powerless. As, at that moment, he was powerless.

Kept, as they appeared to be, incommunicado, by corrupt police, their fate could have been decided already. They could never be released because the action Joyboy (or whoever was responsible for their arrest) had committed was irrevocable. As the man had pointed out himself, Quarshie's contacts were so powerful that once he was able to reach them the whole gang would be in serious trouble. So, Quarshie and the rest of them would have to be held in jail indefinitely or—Quarshie faced the thought squarely—they would have to be killed. They knew too much ever to be set free.

"What are we going to do, Quarshie?" He looked up and

saw Mrs. Quarshie standing with her face against the bars which separated their cells.

"There must be a way," he replied quietly, "leave me to think."

In the evening another prisoner brought them food and water. Later yet another took away the slop buckets. Several times Quarshie asked the jailer to fetch the superintendent and each time he got the same answer:

"He say he nevah want to see you, sah."

The food they were served was poor, heavy, starchy kenke and a little thin soup.

Quarshie called the jailer again. He said, "You go catch market woman with fruit. I go pay her, I go pay you, too." He offered a note for twenty benis through the bars. The man took it without saying anything. Later, after it was dark, the man brought in a woman with a big basket of fruit on her head. It contained mangoes, bananas, oranges and pineapples. There were no lights in the cells to examine the fruit, and all the trading had to be carried out through the bars in the light of a lamp in the corridor.

After the market woman left, there was total silence. It was as if by common consent they had agreed that discussion was pointless unless someone could offer some kind of solution.

For a long time Quarshie lay in the dark with his eyes open telling himself again that there had to be a way to escape. Only one of them had to get to Port St. Mary and then help would soon be despatched. It might also be useful to know who was holding them prisoner because it might deter the kidnappers from killing them. But he modified that opinion when he thought further. Joyboy and possibly the superintendent had to be connected with the murders of the Say-say villagers, which had already been committed. So, being charged with four more murders would not make any difference to their sentence, which would be death in public before a firing squad. Also, he thought, if someone got to Port St. Mary it could, at least, buy time. Although on the other hand it might speed their deaths, or cause them to be badly

treated in revenge, and he was thinking particularly of the two women and Arimi.

He concluded that if they did nothing they would never escape and they would almost certainly be killed. If he managed to get word to Uncle Tee it made it possible to hope.

So who should try to smuggle himself out and how? It could not be the white woman, and his size made a joke of it, a bad joke. Mrs. Quarshie would blend into the crowds outside quite well, if she could get far enough away from the police station to join them. But Arimi had done something like this once before. He was agile, perceptive and courageous. The question was how to get him out.

****

Forty-eight hours later Mrs. Quarshie discovered, at the same moment that the market woman came in to deliver the fruit, that she was suffering from a severe pain on the inside of her thigh and called the jailer's attention to it. She asked him to bring his lamp over to examine the place and pulled her cloth up around her waist. The man found the temptation irresistible—as he was meant to. Lying on her back on her sleeping mat, Mrs. Quarshie made him kneel and, opening her legs, asked him to palpate the region where she claimed to feel the pain. When he touched her she writhed, pretending that it hurt greatly, at the same time praising him for the gentleness of his touch and telling him that he would make a good doctor.

The man had left the door open when he entered the cell, though he had closed and locked the outer door. A good deal of money passed between Quarshie and the market woman, who had emptied her basket of fruit, passing it to Quarshie through the bars of his cell where he hid it in his rolled-up sleeping mat. Then Arimi got into the basket, kneeling with his head as near to his knees as possible, and the cloth, which had been covering the fruit, was replaced to cover him.

Linda helped the woman lift her new load onto her head and Mrs. Quarshie thanked the jailer, who was sweating and

whose hands were now shaking, for his attention, and told him that perhaps he could come the next day to make another check, if he would. Out of a dry mouth the man said yes, yes, he would come.

So shaken was he that he overlooked the need to make sure that all his prisoners were still where they should be. He assumed that the boy was in one of the dark corners that his hurricane lamp left undisturbed. Only later did it occur to him to come back and make an examination.

When he found that Arimi was missing his reaction was not what his prisoners had expected. He realised that the boy must have left somehow with the market woman—therefore, his concern was with how he was going to escape the wrath of the superintendent when Arimi's disappearance was discovered.

His response to this anxiety was to make off as fast as he could for the bush in the opposite direction to the one taken by Arimi.

CHAPTER TEN

"Dr. Quarshie kidnapped."

Arimi sat in a large armchair in the perm sec's office and told his story. "From Biliani to Sekodé I travelled in the forest just beside the road. I had to go more slowly that way but I could not get lost and I could watch the traffic on the road. Many policemen and others, like the men in the market, came past going towards Sekodé."

Arimi was dirty and tired, but cool and articulate. Watching him, the old, white-haired, corpulent man noted the deep circles under the boy's eyes and his concentration as he spoke.

"I knew they would go to Sekodé and I had to go there too —only there could I get help. But because they would be waiting for me I could not take the straight way into the village. You remember, sir, that I lived in a fishing village before my father was killed; I know the beach and the sea. So I made for the coast to the west of the village. I had money for food but I did not dare to buy any. I stole some plantains and left a little money for those who owned them in a place where they would find it.

"I travelled all the first night and for a little while after daylight and then I rested and slept near a small river. As soon as it grew dark I started to travel again, going as fast as I could."

Arimi did not tell the perm sec that he had kept reminding himself of Ajua's courage as she had ignored her fear of the mana'kpoi on her way to Port St. Mary.

"Long before it got light on that second night I reached the beach and went straight down into the sea and came east in

the shallows. It was calm and I could move with only my head above the surface and my feet on the ground. I travelled that way from when the dying moon was above my head until it came down to the horizon behind me. Then I came to Sekodé.

"As I had expected, the police were not guarding the village from the sea, though some of the strangers from Port St. Mary were in the village. Moving in the shadows, I came to old Aba's house. A stranger was asleep by the door so I climbed over a wall.

"There, I told my story, they fed me and I rested until a woman came into the compound with a fishing net on her head. I was rolled in the net and the woman carried me to the beach and I was put into a big fishing canoe. When we were out of sight of land we turned east and I was brought to the beach here. It took longer than it would have had I been in a lorry but it was much safer."

"And it was very well done," the perm sec told Arimi. "You are a boy but you use your wits like a clever man." Then he remained silent for a little while thinking over what he had heard. Eventually he said, "You cannot have been followed, so the people in Biliani who are responsible for these crimes will not know that you have arrived here. Those who are led by this man Joyboy—I know him well for the vicious man that he is—are determined to create intertribal bad feeling. So what is secret must remain secret and you and I must discover a way to solve our problem that the colonel will approve. My driver will take you home, boy. Sleep, eat, wash and I will consider what must be done. So long as you and I are the only people who know about this thing we can use surprise and that is the major advantage in any battle."

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As it turned out the ability to use surprise did not remain with the perm sec for very long.

The *Clarion Call,* the Port St. Mary evening paper, appeared a few hours later with a banner headline which proclaimed, "DR. QUARSHIE KIDNAPPED."

It was the tradition of the *Clarion Call* to employ young reporters because they worked for less money and they made up for it in the satisfaction they received from seeing their own unedited words in print under their by-lines. Thus their stories were often excessively exuberant. On this story there were two subheads: the first read, *"Mrs. Quarshie and American Scientist Also Held"*; the second read, *"Murder Said to Be Rampant in Saysay Villages."*

The body copy read:

Dr. Quarshie, Akhana's popular criminal investigator, may have walked into a deadly trap when he voluntarily went to investigate the mysterious deaths of a number of Saysay citizens in the Biliani region.

In total, nineteen men, women and children are reported to have died in unnatural circumstances in the six villages over the past few weeks. Now your *Clarion Call* reporter can throw some revealing light on Dr. Quarshie's mission and the events surrounding his so-called arrest. Don't be misled. He and the two women with him were not arrested. They were kidnapped—by the local police.

As a lamb attracts a tiger, as sugar attracts an ant and as a cry for help attracts a noble knight, so the desperate situation that has arisen in Sekodé and the surrounding villages attracted Port St. Mary's own Dr. Quarshie.

But could it be that they attracted him to his doom?

According to a member of the crew of a Sekodé canoe which brought the doctor's valourous son to our beach, the good doctor's tigerish, ant-like and knightly instincts may have landed him in grave trouble.

For there can be no doubt that if all your reporter has learned is true the doctor, his wife and the American woman are in serious danger because they know more about what is going on in Saysay land than anyone else and especially about the activities of the delinquent authorities of law and order there.

This is a case where a little knowledge is a dangerous

thing and a lot of knowledge can be fatal. For, those who have knowledge, particularly where it relates to the activities of criminals, are feared. Fear breeds hate. Hate breeds murderous instincts.

So Dr. Quarshie and the two women could be in the hands of murderers and the best brains in the government must now assemble their wits and find out ways and means to set up an immediate rescue operation.

Now is not the time for any heels to be alllowed to drag. Don't spare the horses, Colonel Jedawi, sir. Illustrious President, take the power for decision for which you are justly famous in both hands and lead the way to the rescue of the man with an international reputation for his high courage and his good works, Dr. Quarshie . . . not forgetting, of course, that toothsome lady, his wife, and the American woman.

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The Port St. Mary *Clarion Call* with its account of Quarshie's arrest lay crumpled on the floor where Jo Jo had thrown it while he lay constricted with rage. Just when he was on the point of scoring, when the hustle looked like . . . he simmered down and let the thought dissolve into a memory.

During his second spell in the penitentiary he had been privileged to be the member of a "court" that was presided over by James "Casanova" Brown. Casanova was one of the most respected men in the pen. He was older than the others, tough, wise and shrewd but he had a weakness which was explicit in his nickname: it was women.

When he had invited Jo Jo to join his court Casanova was in for his fifth term and in the case of three out of his five sentences—they had been beautifully planned robberies—he had been set up for the police by women. Casanova's was the most formidable mutual promotion and protection society in the jail. A man had to pass all his tests with almost the same cool, ruthless determination that Casanova himself always displayed.

Very early on in their association the old con had told Jo Jo, "Remember these things, man. If you can't pay and you can't win, don't play. Don't whine, don't cop out, don't suck around, don't lose your head. Play it cool, man, be tough and don't be a sucker, be sharp." It was like a creed he'd had to learn by heart.

Now he'd lost his cool. It was that woman. So now, he repeated to himself, "Don't whine. Don't lose your head. Be tough." Somehow he had to make a recovery. He had already put out a lot of bread, and he had to come up with more. And he had to be sure this wouldn't happen again, and that meant straightening out the woman.

He got up off the floor, took a shower, used a lot of deodorant, combed his hair and then he lay down on the floor again to wait for Ruby and to practice a skill he had learned when he had been condemned to spending sixteen to twenty-four hours a day in a nine-foot by four-foot cell. It was an escape mechanism which allowed him, like those who practice yoga, to free himself of his flesh and his surroundings. First he had learned to commit to memory passages from any text that held, for him, some sort of magic. Then, with his eyes shut, he recalled one of them, visualising the scenes, patterns and colour.

Now, feeling the rough prickle of the goat-hair mat against the skin of his back and thighs, he sought for and found the words from a chance discovery, a work by Jorge Luis Borges, which acted on his mind like a prayer, or like music. The words were as satisfying as the food his mother had cooked for him when he was small and she had had a man who paid her generously because she had pleased him well.

He tasted the words carefully and with great concentration. The Argentinian had written:

> In the final years of the century, from twilight of dawn to twilight of dusk, a leopard looked upon some wooden planks, some vertical iron bars, men and women who were always different, a thick wall and, perhaps, a stone

trough filled with dry leaves. The leopard did not know, could not know, that what he craved was love and cruelty and the hot pleasure of rending and the odour of deer on the wind; and yet something within the animal choked him and something rebelled, and God spoke to him in a dream: You live and will die in this prison, so that a man I know may look at you a certain number of times and not forget you and put your figure and your symbol in a poem which has its precise place in the scheme of the universe. You suffer captivity, but you will furnish the world with a poem. In the dream God enlightened the rough beast, so that the leopard understood God's reasons and accepted his destiny; and yet when he awoke, he felt merely an obscure resignation, a gallant ignorance, for the machinery of the world is overly complex for the simplicity of a wild beast.

Somehow it soothed his fury so that he regained his perspective.

When Ruby arrrived an hour late she was as full of self-confidence as ever. She had not seen the newspaper. Jo Jo pressed out the wrinkles and gave it to her.

At first she did not take in what she read and then, when she did, she understood the depth of Jo Jo's rage beneath his superficial calm and she felt real fear of him for the first time.

He was aware of her fear and it amused him and satisfied him. Nor could he resist playing with it a little. He wanted to see her flinch.

He said, "Maybe I should twist your tail a bit, eh? Twist it until it comes right off in my hand. Didn't you tell me once that you were afraid of blood? Yeah, I remember now, but what you didn't say was whether it was your own blood you were afraid of seeing or other people's. Not that that matters, does it? Because there is only two of us here and I sure as hell ain't going to bleed."

She buried her head in the mattress and waited, silent and shaking.

Jo Jo went to the refrigerator, then stood in front of her. "Look at me," he ordered. "Look." She lifted her face to his and he took out his cigarette lighter and turned the gas jet up as far as it would go.

"See that?" he asked. "Maybe it would be better if I burnt it off." He walked around behind her. He paused to keep her in suspense for a moment, then he said, "How's this for starters?" And he pressed a handful of ice against her.

Her head went up to scream as what she thought was the flame touched her skin, then she let it fall forward again and her breath came out in a long shuddering gasp.

Jo Jo stepped back and stood looking down at her. Softly he said, "I should have done it, you know that? You deserved it—you and those baboons, for the way you balled this thing up, letting that kid get loose. Look at me."

She turned on her back and opened her eyes.

He went and sat in a low chair. "Come here and stand in front of me."

Mutely she obeyed him.

"You remember what I said about that dude Casanova Brown and how he let women get in his way? Well, you ain't going to catch me like that, baby. This time I'm going to turn this trick around again so that it works for all of us. I've got it figured. You hear me? But next time you do something like this to me, next time . . . I'll kill you. You hear?"

He looked up at her and she nodded.

"We've got a different thing going now. You get it? Yeah? You'd best be sure of it, baby. Very, very sure."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"We have to assume that the doctor and the two women are still alive . . ."

Colonel Jedawi's staff feared him. He was a small man, humourless, intense and consumed by his determination to make his country a force to be reckoned with in Africa.

When Arimi and the perm sec faced him, knowing that Quarshie's kidnapping had been leaked to the press, it was Arimi whom Jedawi put at his ease and the perm sec whom he left nervous and uncertain. Jedawi, in fact, virtually ignored the old man and concentrated on Arimi.

"This American woman," he wanted to know, "what sort of woman is she? Do you think she is attractive to the doctor?"

"I don't know, sir, but I think that she likes him."

"Why?"

"She talks to him so much. She does not talk to anyone else in the same way."

"Does she listen and do what he tells her to do?"

"Yes, sir."

Turning to the perm sec, he said, "Then we shall be able to tell the American ambassador that the woman will probably be freed. So long as he is in full control Dr. Quarshie will find a way out.

"If I can find the right way to help I shall do all I can, boy, but if I go the wrong way about it I shall be like a man who kills and buries a sheep to save it from being eaten." He rang a small hand bell and a major seemed to materialise from nowhere. He advanced three paces from the door by which he

had entered, saluted and stood stiffly at attention waiting to be noticed.

Jedawi had turned to look out of the window at the long stretch of beach where the surf broke and the palms bent away from the force of the wind. Without bothering to look to see if the man was there, he said, "Major da Santos, I want you to tell Colonel Ekwedgie to put his three best units of the commandos on red alert. They are to be ready to leave for an unspecified destination at fifteen minutes notice. And tell the garrison commander at Camp Kanura to have all the counterinsurgency units in his command on standby and to cancel all leave for those units. Repeat those instructions, issue them and have them on my desk for signature in ten minutes."

The major barked an exact repetition of the orders, saluted, made a parade-ground about turn and departed.

"Does that satisfy you, boy?" Jedawi asked Arimi after the door had closed behind his A.D.C.

After a long time, Arimi said, "When a fire has broken out it is helpful to know that there are men standing by with buckets of water."

Jedawi laughed. "So what would you do?" he asked. "I need more information before I can order men into action. We have to assume that the doctor and the two women are still alive; therefore, injudicious action might bring about their deaths."

"Yes, sir. And I, sir—with your permission—will go back to Biliani to discover what I can of what is happening there. Then I will find a way of reporting back to Port St. Mary."

"To me, direct, boy. And be careful, you have the makings of a good soldier. Remember, you can do more for your uncle by staying alive than you can from a pocket in the earth."

Jedawi used an African expression traditionally employed by his people to describe a grave: where there were many graves, the place is called "a pocket full of dead."

CHAPTER TWELVE

"He had never felt so close to despair in his life."

Quarshie's sleep was like the sleep of a man in a high fever. He and the two women had been moved immediately after Arimi's absence had been discovered. Now they were each in separate cells that had stone blocks for walls, damp, slippery paving for the floor and, being underground, were windowless. Quarshie had been unable to communicate with the others for two days, after he had spent a bizarre afternoon with Joyboy. It was the memory of that visit which kept tumbling into and out of his consciousness.

His bed was made of thick planks that were fixed a foot above the floor and, every time he breathed, the air he took into his lungs brought with it, along with other foul smells, the odour of fungus. The only light in the cell came from the corridor outside through a small barred window in the door.

As he moved on his plank bed he flinched away from an accidental contact his naked shoulder made with the clammy masonry. Then he slithered towards sleep and at once drifted back to . . .

The place was furnished in the style of an English sitting room of fifty years ago. They were chintz covers on overstuffed chairs and there was a wine-red plush sofa. The curtains were made of material decorated with blue roses. There was also a glass-fronted cabinet with pieces of silver and some Wedgwood pottery in it. The pictures on the wall were sporting prints showing men on Scottish moors shooting grouse or, beside fast-running water, fishing for salmon.

In the middle of this incongruous setting there was lodged an enormously fat and very black woman wearing what those who once knew about such things would have called a tea gown.

Joyboy was saying, "My wife lived in England for many years, you know." And the fat woman had giggled coyly.

Quarshie was wearing a white collarless tunic and shorts which came below his knees. It was the uniform worn by all male inmates of the state prisons. His hands were in handcuffs and he was barefooted.

Half awake again, he remembered that Joyboy and his wife were drinking tea and eating cake but, though they invited him to sit down, they offered him nothing to eat.

When Quarshie was brought under police escort to the bungalow, Joyboy met him with, "Come in, big man, come in. We were expecting you. Pity you did not take to heart what I told you at our last meeting. Actually I would call your behaviour meddlesome, you know? Oh, by the way, meet my wife. Martha, this is the Dr. Quarshie you have heard about so often. A name to conjure with, wouldn't you say? Though not, of course, at the moment. Are they taking better care of you now at the jail since that little rat of a son of yours escaped? That made me very angry, you know? As I told my wife, one cannot trust anyone else to ever do a thorough job. And of course it is quite impossible for me to be everywhere at once.

"Sit down, please, sit down."

It was as if someone had trapped all that the little man had said on a tape recorder and now the tape was unreeling in Quarshie's mind.

The woman said nothing but she never took her small black eyes off him for a moment. All the time he was in the room she sat staring at him, her legs under the skirt of her gown wide apart and her hands clasped together on her lap as if they were supporting her enormous belly.

Joyboy said, "It was foolish of you to allow that boy to escape, Doctor. Very foolish. So long as you were, shall we say,

incommunicado, you were no threat to us. But now, since the boy slipped through to Port St. Mary, you are very much on our minds."

"Of course I've sent some men to bring the boy back—dead or alive. Which of those two alternatives it is is really neither here nor there. Though if he were dead he could not cause us any more trouble and it might persuade you, Dr. Quarshie, to be a bit more careful.

"We have, however, other ways of ensuring that you behave yourself from now on. The women . . . you know? There are a lot of men who work for me who would not need any encouragement to . . ."

Then his voice faded into the distance and solid dreamless sleep overtook the erratic wanderings of Quarshie's mind. Eventually he came back to the same half-world in which he had heard Joyboy's voice. This time the commissioner was answering a question, perhaps one that he, himself, had put to him.

"But we are civilised people, Doctor. If we have to resort to war it would be barbaric, like those people in Northern Ireland. To give my people a chance we have to have the salt pans and the prawns. They have to belong to us. Besides, they are not being developed in the right way, you know. We have to catch up with the times and use all the technology that is available to us.

"Costly? Of course, but capital is not our problem. The problem is getting rid of the Saysay people. We can't drive them out with guns—that would be counterproductive, a bad case, in fact, of overkill. No, I prefer the method we are using."

Besides Joyboy's voice Quarshie's memory provided him with visual images, unexpected ones.

At what moment the next event took place he could not be sure. He must have been standing on the verandah when two men came past on the other side of the balustrade. The verandah was raised about six feet above the driveway yet the men

were walking so that their eye level was the same as that of Quarshie and Joyboy.

Looking over the balustrade, Quarshie saw that they were walking on stilts. And as he came more fully awake, he wondered whether the images belonged to his dreams. Even more strange was the discovery that the tracks they left were those of sheep or goats.

Joyboy said, "Fons, you know, from Benin. There is a group of them settled near here. They go and dance in the marketplace occasionally to earn a few benis. The hoof marks their stilts leave are something they have developed locally."

"Do they have stilts which leave imprints of tiny feet?" Had he asked Joyboy that question, Quarshie wondered, or was he asking it of himself now?

He touched the wall again with his shoulder and shuddered away from it. There was no way of knowing whether it was light or dark in the world above ground.

All three of them had been roughly handled by the police when Arimi's absence was discovered. And all their property had been confiscated; the women had been allowed to keep their clothes but his had been taken away. There was a continuing cold silence in the cell and Quarshie realised that they could be left forever locked in there, forgotten, entombed.

Quarshie got up off his bed and peered through the small barred window in the door. He could see nothing but the rust-streaked wall on the other side of the corridor. He was still wearing handcuffs and he wondered whether the women were also manacled. He wondered, too, whether he should call out to them but decided against it, in case the warder would take reprisals against them, or him.

"I have men who work for me who . . ." What was he to do?

Sensory deprivation—he had read medical papers about it. To be deprived of daylight was more important than anything else to him. He understood for the first time the kind of terror the men and women who were exported from West Africa must have felt when they found themselves chained in the

darkness of the hold of a slave ship as she pitched and rolled across the South Atlantic. There had been fifty million of them, of whom a third perished along the way.

At least, he thought, they could blame other people of other races for the inhumanity they suffered. Then he corrected himself. It was their own people who had sold them into slavery and often their own people who were the overseers who used whips in the cane and cotton fields.

At least they were still receiving water and food—enough, it seemed, to keep them alive. So they weren't intended to die yet.

If he ever got free, he would take his revenge. It was worth staying alive to see daylight again. And there were the "human germs," as Arimi had called them, to be dealt with. They had put themselves outside the boundaries of all that was human.

He lay back again on his bed and listened to the silence.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"When you hold hostages it means you're looking for some kind of reward, right?"

Ruby, carrying her shiny black-plastic handbag on her head, made her stately way past the police guard at the entrance of Joyboy's office and climbed the stairs to a verandah on the first floor.

A clerk, with his hair stuck full of pencils, looked up from his desk when he heard her footsteps. As she approached him he stood up, bowed and said, "The commissioner is in his office, modah." The last word was pronounced to sound somewhere between "mother" and "madam."

Following a familiar routine Ruby walked along the glassed-in verandah, which was very old-fashioned—a relic, in fact, of the colonial days and built entirely of wood—and found Joyboy glancing through a document which had a large red piece of cardboard attached to it upon which the word "URGENT" was printed.

As she entered he threw the document aside, obviously glad to have an excuse to do so. He said, "The people in Port St. Mary want a statistical breakdown of illiteracy figures by tribe and by village. Somebody in the government must spend his time trying to think up useless jobs for other people to do just to justify his continuing employment. Idiots." He waved to a chair which faced him across his desk. "You are welcome, Ruby. Sit down, sit down. Yes, really, you are most welcome."

Ruby removed her bag from her head, took the chair and replied, "I should be welcome. I have brought some money for you."

She opened her bag and took a wad of dollar bills from it.

"From our friend?"

"Who else? He gave me five hundred."

"Dollars are always a problem," he said irritably. "I have to go to the black market with them."

"And get more for them than you would at the bank. Do you think you could get rid of half a million dolllars that way?"

"Half a million dollars? Are you serious?"

Ignoring his question, Ruby asked, "How are the hostages?"

"Hostages?"

"Yes. Quarshie and his women. You have not, I hope, been amusing yourself with them."

Joyboy smirked. "Not yet. But it would be very easy. It's an interesting idea."

"More interesting than half a million dolllars?"

"What are you talking about, woman?"

"What I have been told to talk to you about. When you hold hostages it means that you are looking for some kind of reward, right?"

Joyboy frowned and then said slowly, "Like half a million dollars?"

"More than that, but half a million would be yours and mine to share. He would get more."

"For what? How does he come into this?"

"That money you have in your pocket is his. So far he has given you tens of thousands. With what results? He has had nothing back. But why don't you go and ask him that question yourself? Though it would be wise to remember that there are a lot of other men who he can buy if he wants to."

"And you'd be his agent?"

"Why not? I can recognize a fair offer and I know, too, how rough he can get."

"Are you going to get a split of his share of the money, too?"

"Maybe. We might go into business together somewhere

else, in Lagos, or Abidijan. With the money we will pick up on this thing we could start right at the top."

"How can you be so sure? Has he got it worked out?"

"Of course."

"Am I allowed to know the details or do I just have to go on risking kidnapping charges, working blind?"

"Do you ever work any other way? The kidnapping was your idea. He was furious."

"I didn't make any mistakes—it was that fool of a policeman."

"The whole thing is out in the open, blown. He's not interested in *who* made the mistakes. But you are the boss here and he is not sure whether to keep working with you or not."

"So what are you telling me?"

"That if you want to pick up a half million dollars you do it his way and don't ask how much he is going to take."

"And his plan? Can I know about that?"

"It's very simple. You continue to hold them, but keep them in good shape. No one is going to be eager to pay ransom money for goods that have been damaged. The ransom note will be sent to Jedawi. Jo Jo will take care of that. I'll bring you a copy."

"What makes you think anyone will pay that sort of money for those three?"

"Jedawi has just got the first signatures on a loan he has been after from the U.S. It could make a mess of his plans if a U.S. citizen got kidnapped and then got killed. As for Quarshie, there would be an awful lot of people upset, even in the Army, if he got hurt. What is a million plus to the Army, anyway? All it means is that they will have to cross a few tanks and guns off their shopping list."

Joyboy fidgeted with a black ebony ruler on his desk, looked out of the window, then back to Ruby.

"If I was Jedawi I would want proof that, as you say, the goods had not been damaged before I paid for them."

"Of course. You'll let Mrs. Quarshie go. She will be taken back to report on the healthy condition of the other two."

"And if she won't go?"

"Put Quarshie in front of a firing squad where she can watch the execution. Or tell her that you have caught the boy and if she does not do as she is told he will be fed in little pieces to the crocodiles in the mangrove swamps. From the ransom point of view she is not important; it's Quarshie and the American woman who count."

"And we stop the campaign against the Saysay?"

"He did not tell me that. I asked him and he said, 'Keep our options open there, too. Maybe we can pull them both off.' "

"What about continuing expenses?"

"That's what the money I gave you is for."

"Well, give the policeman forty. Tell him he is lucky to get any at all because the American is so angry. And don't tell him anything about the new plan."

"And you?" Joyboy peeled thirty dollars off the wad and put it in front of her on his desk.

"No. Not here. Send Martha away for the rest of the day."

Joyboy looked across at her and there were the beginnings of a smile on his face. He picked up the telephone and told it, "Put me through to my wife."

Joyboy said, "Martha? Yes. Yes, I just heard that the U.D.K. has received a new shipment of cloth. Yes. Don't you think you should get down there. Yes, right away. I'll ring the manager and tell him to hold the best for you, or he'll be in trouble. Then you can distribute it. Have Zeb take you in the car. You'll be back before it gets dark. Yes, I'll back you up to two hundred *askedis*. Fine." He put the phone back in its cradle, shaking his head. "Two hundred askedis and thirty dollars," he growled. "The price is high."

Ruby, pouting, told him, "Is it really so much to a man with half a million dollars ready to be deposited in the bank and two hundred askedis in cloth that will make you a hundred per cent profit? Is it?"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"I think the real answer to your question might be . . . till death do us part. Do you accept that?"

They came for Mrs. Quarshie in the middle of the night. They did not underestimate her strength but sent six men with simple orders: "Get her out of her cell without making any noise."

The men entered the cell quickly. The first to enter had her gagged before she was properly awake. After that it was simple. She was wrapped in a straitjacket, strapped tightly and carried upstairs to another cell at the top of the building. There, like a trussed chicken, she was left gagged until she was brought a bowl of rice gruel a little after sunrise.

Those who released her would not answer any of her questions nor was she able to provoke them into saying anything at all. But she had one consolation: the cell was clean, had been freshly whitewashed and, for a part of the day, the sun traced a moving image of the closely barred window on the opposite wall. The opening was too high, unfortunately, to enable her to see anything outside except the sky.

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An hour before dawn they came for Linda and Quarshie, who were led out of their cells blindfolded and handcuffed with their hands behind their backs. Then they were taken to a panel truck and pushed unceremoniously into it. Later, when their blindfolds were removed, they found that the truck had only two small windows in the rear door, and that it contained eight men who were in the charge of the same man

who had taken them, earlier, to the fetish grove with Ajua and Arimi.

They were sitting on sacks of rice which had been piled two deep across the front of the truck. The others were sitting or lounging on other sacks that, from their acrid smell, were filled with sun-dried or smoked fish. There were also a number of bundles, two of which, they found later, were for them and contained two rough military blankets, two twelve-yard lengths of very coarse unbleached cotton, two small iron cooking pots, two enamelled dishes and mugs, two cheap metal spoons, several cans of palm oil and a block of salt.

Linda was sitting beside Quarshie and voiced immediately, the same question that was in his mind, "Where is Mrs. Quarshie?"

The doctor turned and spoke over his shoulder to the headman, who was riding beside the driver. "Where is my wife?" His tone was cool but threatening.

The man shrugged and replied, "She never my business, Doctor. You and dis missus here my business."

"You did not see her?"

"No, sah."

"The door of her cell was open and it was empty when we left, correct?" Quarshie asked Linda.

She nodded.

"She was in that cell next to you, wasn't she?"

"I think so."

"I wonder if they know what they are doing? And what they've done with her?"

"And with what purpose in mind?" Linda added.

It was a question she asked several times and one that Quarshie could now answer. "The district commissioner and his friends are trying to frighten the Saysay people away from their lagoons by using phoney witchcraft. This trouble we are in is all connected to that. Joyboy, the district commissioner, wants to take over the lagoons for his followers. I was taken to his bungalow so that he could have the pleasure of taunting me in front of his fat wife. But there was something he said which did not quite fit in with everything else.

"He wants to industrialise the area by setting up a plant to can prawns and the salt using timber from the mangroves to fire his factories. And you have to have money, lots of it, to start something like that. I wonder who is providing it?"

"And where they are taking us and why?"

"And where Mrs. Quarshie is. Where are we going?" He turned and addressed the last question to the headman.

"I never fit to tell you, sah. Some place you never escape, never get away."

"Why?"

"Maybe dey go feah you too much.'"

"But why leave my wife behind?"

"Maybe dey nevah feah her. She no my palaver," he repeated.

"What are your orders concerning us?"

"Be sure too much you don' escape, sah, like day your piccin. Make sure you n'a missus here don' get hurt, dat you don' go be dead when the mastah says he want you. He tell me we never go make you dead. When he want you dead he fit kill you hisself."

"And Mrs. Quarshie . . . did he speak about her?"

"At all, sah. At all. Though I hear some man say he get ordah dey go feed her good."

Quarshie turned back to Linda. "Short-term prognosis seems a bit encouraging. Sounds as if we are being held as hostages. They took us because I was putting my nose into their business. Or perhaps it was even more elaborate. They could have used Ajua as a tool to get us to Sekodé with a plan to kidnap us in the backs of their minds all the time."

"Do you think they included me in that plan?"

Quarshie shook his head. "I doubt that they thought that we might develop a . . . a friendship. But once we did, you became as dangerous as I was and infinitely more valuable in cash terms."

After a moment she said in a rather shaky little voice, "Sit closer to me, please." She moved towards him and leant sideways so that she had her head on his shoulder.

One or two of the men in the truck looked at them and frowned, but no one said anything. Linda closed her eyes and slept a little, more lightly than she had been able to sleep for days.

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After several hours, during which the heat in the truck became solid, making them feel as if they had been baked in a dusty transparent cube of glass brick, the vehicle stopped and Linda and Quarshie were helped out. Their handcuffs were taken off and they were allowed to exercise some of the stiffness out of their shoulders before the manacles were put on again. This time they had their hands in front of them.

Then they were led around to the front of the truck and they saw that it stood at the end of the road with nothing beyond it except a narrow footpath.

The headman said, "We get two miles to walk 'fore we get some village. Bye an' bye, dere, goin' get some chop."

They were given a drink of water from a calabash, the first they had had since the previous evening. Then each man was loaded with one of the sacks of fish or rice. There was also one for Quarshie. The two bundles were tied together so that Linda could carry them over her shoulder. The men who were heading the sacks carried their own bundles balanced on top of their loads.

Only the headman did not carry a load—he held a high-powered rifle of the kind used by skilled marksmen. He called their attention to a grey tree lizard, with a bright orange head and tip to its tail, which was drowsing in a small patch of sun on the stump of a tree more than a hundred yards away. In a seemingly casual way he aimed at the creature and fired. Instantly it was carried in a short upward arc by the impact of the bullet and then fell to the ground almost cut in half at the shoulders.

To Quarshie the headman said, "So don' you try run away, big man, catch sabbe? Or maybe I go make hole in your ear if I don' go shoot for your back for dis place here"—he tapped

the lowest vertebra on Quarshie's back—"den you never go run, no place, no more." The man spoke in a matter-of-fact way without any viciousness or apparent malice.

Having established his power, he ordered them to move off and they moved in single file, with two men leading followed by Linda, who, in turn, was followed by Quarshie, with the others bringing up the rear.

The doctor had not carrried anything on his head since he was fifteen or sixteen, but the trick of maintaining the load in balance and the style of walk that went with it were abilities which, like riding a bicycle, having once been learned are never forgotten.

The weight Linda was carrying was not great but the cord holding the two bundles together cut into her shoulder so that she had to change it frequently from one side to the other.

She was wearing the same dress that she had had on when they had been captured in the taxi. Now it was considerably the worse for wear, stained with sweat, marked with dust and dirt. She had also had to sleep in the garment. They had been given no water with which to wash themselves and had had to take what they could spare from what they were given to drink. She had plaited her hair into two long braids for the sake of convenience and to conceal the fact that, like almost everything else about her, it, too, was dirty.

Quarshie had noticed, as she got out of the panel truck, that she had lost some weight, particularly in her face, and this had emphasised the sharp lines of her chin and had also brought out her cheekbones. By contrast the loss of a little flesh had given greater emphasis to the rather broad lines of her mouth, the size of her eyes and a general look of vulnerability which appeared when she was not consciously fighting her anxieties and fears.

What she had found from the beginning and continued to find so comforting in her companion was his apparent imperturbability, though she thought that there might have been a slight deepening in the vertical lines between his eyebrows.

Once they got away from the scrub, which had grown up in

the area where the forest had been cleared at the end of the road, they moved into the rain forest. There, sky-scraping trunks with silver-grey bark and great buttressing flanges on the bottoms of the timber, like the fins on the tail of a rocket, supported trees which grew to the height of fourteen-, fifteen- and sometimes sixteen-story buildings. These were the giants and there were many of them forming a top gallery. Below them, making a roof against the sunlight continuous, were trees which stood no higher than a mere six to ten stories high.

Just occasionally freckles of sunlight reached through to the floor, which was covered with a carpet of soft detritus made up of centuries of fallen leaves. Here and there a smaller tree had started its struggle to climb to reach the sunlight. Here and there, too, one of the giants had toppled and it was possible to see from the exposed ends of the buttresses how shallow its roots were, often no more than two or three feet.

Because there were very few trees which carrried any leaves close to the ground, the forest appeared to be an area covering hundreds of acres, with the tree trunks as props holding up a great green roof spread between the sun and the soil.

The stately pillars gave the area an air of sanctity and of peace which demanded that it be left unsullied and that those who came there should intend no violence. After the blazing light outside, the forest was dark with an eerie darkness that threatened those who might disturb its dignity.

The short snaking line of people working their way through the submarine gloom was as insignificant as a newly born elver would be making its way back eastwards through the Atlantic from its breeding grounds to some distant river in northern Europe.

Yet for two people in the file there was no question of their being engaged in anything which might be described as insignificant, unless they were prepared to regard their own survival as a thing of insignificance.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"You're not a soldier, are you? Not a man who is used to dealing with life and death."

"Are any three people worth all that money?" Colonel Jedawi wanted to know. "Have we, or they, the right to ask one and a half million dollars of the taxpayers to keep them alive? Look at it another way. A doctor comes to me and says a man is very sick but if I can spend half a million dollars on him I can keep him alive. And he asks, 'Will you authorise a subvention to the medical services for that sum?' Where would it end? We save a thousand border-line cases and we've blown all our revenue for the year."

He was discussing the ransom note which had been sent to him and to the American ambassador by Jo Jo, who had signed himself as "Z." The note gave instructions for the money, in dollar notes, to be put into two steamer trunks which were to be left unattended on a large raft in the middle of a roughly circular lake which had a diameter of two miles. At the same time all aircraft in the country were to be grounded for a period of four hours. When the ransom had been collected by helicopter, a telegram would be received by the government telling where the hostages could be found.

"It's insane," Jedawi said, "insane."

The perm sec, who was his audience and who loved his nephew and Mrs. Quarshie, had one trump card to play and produced it immediately. "The Americans won't like it, sir, if we don't do anything. They are due to authorise that seventy-five million dollar loan sometime in the next few days. We

need that money, and the ransom for Dr. Quarshie and the woman can be paid out of it, eventually, once it comes through."

Jedawi was still outraged. "So the man does it once and gets away with it. What is to stop a half dozen, or a dozen, or, or . . . as many criminals as you like doing the same thing? No, I'm not going to deal with this 'Z.' What is he, some schoolboy who has been to see that film about Zorro that always excites our people every time the Lebanese cinema owners bring it back? No. I have men in the area where the doctor was last seen. The Saysay people, of course, have shut up like oysters except for that old woman—what do you call her? Aba—who keeps talking about having spoken with Nyampong, whoever he is. It's her opinion that Quarshie will be safe; she has given him some kind of protective amulet. But it is my absolute belief that, with or without that charm, Quarshie would come through—and he'll bring the women with him."

He picked up a file to indicate that the discussion was finished and, with greater courage than he was normally capable of mustering, the perm sec ventured, "If I might say one more word, sir?"

Jedawi frowned at him over the top of the file. "Well?" he snapped.

"Might we not pretend to be negotiating? Might we not reply? This 'Z' says he will listen to the radio for any comments we have to make. Might we not say, sir, that we cannot negotiate until we have some acceptable evidence that all three hostages are, at this moment, alive and in good health? Surely that would at least temporarily satisfy the American ambassador, who keeps ringing the office asking what we are going to do. And it would make it worthwhile for 'Z' too, to keep the hostages alive a little longer."

Jedawi put down the file and said quietly, "All right, go ahead. I consider Quarshie a friend, and his wife a most desirable woman. I agree that we should keep the case open by

negotiating. But, I want you to understand, negotiating is one thing; giving in to this criminal's demand is something else . . . I will never authorise it, never."

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The perm sec left Anholt Castle, which was Jedawi's residence, and went to talk with his minister, a British-trained major who had acquired most of his vocabulary at Sandhurst.

"Give you a rough time, did he, old boy?" was the way the major greeted the man whom, behind his back, he called "Uncle."

"Sorry I couldn't be there to support you on this one. Line of duty took me elsewhere. Besides, special pleading was needed, what? And after all Quarshie *is* your nephew. 'Spect you could use a spot of . . . what is it, now, that you like? Brandy, isn't it?" He went across to a cabinet and poured a small drink for himself and a stiff one for the old man.

The perm sec had sunk into an overstuffed chair, a picture of despondency.

"Here you are." The major's tone was bright and cheerful. "Bottoms up, eh? What?"

The perm sec took a good stiff drink and then recounted the conversation he had had with Jedawi.

"Well, that's not so bad now, is it? I mean the thing's still open, what? And if you don't mind my saying, old man . . . just something off the top of my head, you know . . ." He wiped his small black moustache with his knuckles. "It seems to me as if the colonel has more faith in the capabilities of that folk-hero nephew of yours than you have in him yourself, eh? Wouldn't you say that's how it looks?"

The perm sec nodded and tried to sit a bit straighter in his chair. "Yes," he replied, "yes, you are right." But it didn't work. Shaking his head again, he added, "But you see, he isn't a folk hero to me, he's a man, a good doctor, and he was a little boy I brought up and educated and sent to study in Canada. Though he may be a hero—and *I* think he is—he is also

flesh and blood and he can be killed. If that happened I should want to die too."

The major got up and, speaking more softly, said, "Here. Give me your glass. It hasn't happened yet I'm sure and it isn't going to happen. Understand?" There was a note of command in his last word to which the perm sec responded with a rather half-hearted, "Yes, sir."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"Do you love your husband, Mrs. Quarshie?"

Joyboy had never had any dealings with Mrs. Quarshie so he was quite unprepared for the assault he had to withstand when she was brought into his office.

It would be hard to say whether Mrs. Quarshie ever truly recognised fear in herself. When she found herself in a situation that would normally be frightening to most people her reaction was to counterattack as furiously as she could; so she did not have time to think about being afraid. Quite a lot of her energy was wasted but it did not matter because she shot enough arrows with barbs on them to strike painfully at a variety of her opponent's weak spots. When she was aroused she had an instinct for the jugular, which never ceased to amaze and occasionally amuse her husband.

Joyboy knew she was on the verandah outside his room before he even saw her because he heard her tell his clerk, "I might have known that any man employed in this establishment would be syphilitic. You had better get that sore on your lip seen to or every woman in town will be infected."

Then she barged through the half-jalousie swing doors into his office saying, "What about you, little man? Are you a syphilitic too? The ignorance of people around here is appalling. Is it true for *all* the members of the Dani tribe?"

Joyboy was too stunned to reply.

"And while I'm on the subject, perhaps you would tell this constipated elephant"—she indicated the superintendent of police, who had followed her into the room—"that the jail

here is a public disgrace. The cells are filthy, crawling with lice and bedbugs and rats. Primitive. But then the Dani have always been a primitive people, haven't they? That is why they have always envied the Saysay . . ."

Joyboy slapped the top of his desk with his hand and shouted, "That's enough. Who do you think you're talking to?"

Mrs. Quarshie looked him up and down slowly and said, "A relative of one of the rats I saw in my cell, perhaps? And rather a small one. Are there any other questions you want to ask me?"

Joyboy took a deep breath before he replied, "Yes. Do you love your husband, Mrs. Quarshie?"

Mrs. Quarshie's heart almost stopped beating but she managed to appear unruffled. "Of course," she said, "so do millions of other people. Is there *anyone* who loves you?"

Savagely, Joyboy told her, "If you do love him I suggest you try to co-operate because at any moment I could order his execution and he would be dead within an hour."

Mrs. Quarshie sat down in the chair across the desk from him and said quietly, "All right. Why have you sent for me? What do you want?"

"That's better."

He sat down himself. "Now we are beginning to establish the right relationship. What I want is quite simple. I want a million and a half dollars for the lives of your husband and that American woman."

Mrs. Quarshie kept her face expressionlesss but had difficulty steadying her voice. She swallowed, paused and said, "Who do you expect to pay that amount of money?"

"The government. We are already in touch with them."

"And they have agreed?"

"Not yet, but they have started negotiations. Naturally they want to know that he and the woman are still alive."

"Are they?"

"They are. And we are arranging that you shall receive a letter from your husband at least once every three days testify-

ing to that fact. We are going to return you to Port St. Mary this evening where you will be the main contact between our organisation and the government."

"Why are you sending me back?"

"I am following instructions."

"And Arimi?"

"Arimi?"

"The boy who escaped.'"

"We know nothing about him."

"You did not catch him?"

"I told you—we know nothing."

Mrs. Quarshie froze her anxiety about Arimi so that it would not make her more vulnerable. "May I wash and have a clean cloth before I go back?"

"No doubt this, er, constipated elephant will be able to arrange that. Mrs. Quarshie, I am sure you know that the situation is a very critical one. We don't want you to do anything that is either impulsive or hostile to us while you are in Port St. Mary. If you do"—he shrugged—"there will be a death in your family and you will have brought it about. Also you should know that even in Port St. Mary you are not beyond our reach; you may get a reminder of that from time to time." He drew a deep breath and added, "I would also advise you not to think too much of your husband and that American woman, although I have received reports that she finds him very attractive. They will be sharing the same cell all the time from now on. But, as I said, I shouldn't think about that too much—unless, of course, it makes you feel that the sooner the ransom is paid the better."

Mrs. Quarshie had been looking down at the district commissioner's small hands, with their professionally manicured fingernails, spread out on the desk in front of him. Now she looked up slowly until her eyes met his. She held the gaze steadily until he was forced to look away and said with forced joviality, "Well, that's all. Any questions?" He turned to look back and found he was still faced with the same level-eyed gaze.

"No? Then I wish you luck in your efforts to get the ransom paid. The superintendent will take care of the rest of the details. I have business to attend to in my other office. Good day." And he got up and made what he thought of as a tactical exit.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

". . . as a detention centre no one had ever escaped from it."

The village, when they reached it, was typical of most small villages which lay well off the roads that carried motor traffic. It had changed so little over the years that if the shade of one of the ancestors had returned and passed through it he would have found little that was unfamiliar.

To Western eyes one of its most unique prospects would be that it contained no straight lines. The boles of small trees were used for the pillars that held up the jagged overhanging thatches on the huts. The mud walls of the huts had been built without the use of plumb lines and the surfaces of the walls undulated slightly. There were no streets in the village to provide straight lines, only gaps between one hut and the next that were wide enough to furnish areas for the hearths where the women did the cooking and for small conical mounds beside the hearths. These mounds were the homes of household gods who liked to be near the hearths so that they could hear the women's gossip and thus learn what was going on in the village. In a few cases the cooking areas had thatched roofs over them but were unenclosed by walls.

A Westerner would also notice the fact that the whole of the village was as tidy as the living room of a house-proud spinster in some well-to-do American suburb. It was a tradition that all the village was swept daily and kept completely clear of weeds and of the undergrowth which quickly moved in on any cleared land that was left unattended.

Also, since the site was close to a river, everybody bathed morning and night. So, as soon as Linda and Quarshie were brought to the village they were taken to the river; Quarshie, under guard, to the section of the river used by the men, and Linda, in the care of a jostling, excited crowd of women, to another bathing site.

There, for the first time in many days, Linda had the pleasure of communicating with other women who were friendly but curious, as she knew they would be, about her white skin and chestnut-coloured hair. One of her female guards spoke Saysay so she was able to explain the whiteness of her breasts and hips by showing them the white place on her arm when she took off her wrist watch. But why, the women wanted to know, did she keep her breasts hidden? And she could only reply that it was the custom in her tribe, at which they clucked their tongues and shook their heads.

It was her guards, though they had accepted her as a companion rather than a prisoner, who soaped her with willing hands and scrubbed her with a handful of fibres from some local plant until she had to protest. Their enthusiasm was due, the woman who spoke Saysay explained, to the fact that, particularly where her skin was white, the scrubbing changed it to such a pretty shade of red.

Even beyond the colour of her skin, however, they wondered at the colour and silky softnesss of her hair. They could not stop touching it, holding it in their hands and exclaiming over its beauty when it glinted with rich red-gold highlights as it was washed and dried.

Quarshie's bath, while it refreshed him, lacked any drama.

Afterwards, the man in charge of the guards had told a meeting of the elders of the village, both men and women, that Linda and Quarshie were political prisoners being sent into detention by Colonel Jedawi and that if they escaped the villagers would be held responsible and might be executed for their carelessness. He added that he had the power to perform this judgement against them and demonstrated his ability with

his rifle by shooting a bird out of a tree, which impressed them very profoundly.

They were simple people not given to questioning authority so when Quarshie tried to explain to one or two of them their predicament and asked someone to take a messsage to Port St. Mary the villagers looked and acted dumb and were careful not to hear what he said.

Nonetheless, the twelve hours Quarshie and Linda stayed in the village was the most pleasant period they experienced since their kidnapping. Linda even managed to acquire a length of local cloth to replace her soiled and torn dress. It was given to her in exchange for a large clipping of her hair, which reduced it from shoulder length to a short bob.

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The next day they walked on through the comparatively cool though humid atmosphere of the forest and at the end of a long day's trek, led by a villager, they bivouacked in small leafy huts made for them by women who had been hired in the village to carry some of the headloads of rice and fish. The huts were erected very quickly near the banks of another river where, because there was abundant sunlight, there was a dense growth of secondary forest. From amongst the trees in that area many young saplings were cut and at the camp site they were bent to make an arc with both ends forced into the ground. Eight or nine such arcs were formed over a diameter of seven feet. Through these arcs lianas were threaded to make a large wicker-work beehive-shaped frame-work over which plate-sized leaves were fixed to serve as tiles, each row overlapping the one beneath it. Though it rained heavily during the night the only rain that came through was where a leaf had been misplaced, a fault that could with some trial and error, be corrected. Where the construction failed completely was in its ability to keep out mosquitoes and other insects.

When the huts were allotted to the guards, their prisoners and the villagers who were accompanying them, Quarshie and

Linda were ordered to share the same one because, as the headman said, "Then I mus' watch one hut go for see you or missus no go run for bush. Too, when dis dis man I get for guard tink maybe he like to go make piccin wid white missus den he have to go pass you, Doctah, an' you go call me an' we go catch 'um one time."

It was an arrangement that Linda welcomed but one that left Quarshie in two frames of mind. Certainly, as far as he saw it as his duty to protect Linda from the other men, the arrangement was a good one. He had been left unmanacled and with the headman and his gun nearby he could be fairly certain that she would not be molested.

But so far as his relationship with Linda was concerned the arrangement made him uneasy. As a much younger man in Montreal he had become involved with a white woman, a French Canadian. For Quarshie it had been an unhappy experience. She had, in a way, tried to show him off to her friends as . . . Quarshie had never been quite certain as what. An example of her freedom from racism? Because she was attracted to his vitality and strength and proud of it? Because she truly did not see his colour, as she claimed, but liked him for the man inside his skin? Or because it was simply exciting and exotic to have a black boy friend? He fancied that there were elements of all four reasons involved.

Linda had even stronger reasons for wanting to establish a relationship with him. She needed him badly in several ways: as a protector, as a person she could talk to as an intellectual equal, as a friend because she could count on no one else to fill that need and, it seemed to him, she needed him in a way in which physical contact might inevitably become a part. The latter, of course, could well be no more than something comradely and platonic. He found her attractive, interesting and, most likely, if their friendship proceeded without control, tempting. But, he told himself, this could be disastrous for both of them.

It did not matter, he thought, that others might find his attitude quaint and unworldly. Perhaps he had already been

naïve when he had made the pledge, as much to himself as to Mrs. Quarshie, that in all things they would be loyal to and honest with each other. Of course, it had not always been possible to avoid all back-sliding, though he fancied Mrs. Quarshie had been more successful in maintaining her side of the bargain. They had, he knew, deceived each other over little things, and once, once he had . . . Quarshie put the memory aside except to tell himself that probably neither he nor Mrs. Quarshie would be alive if he had not surrendered to a certain woman on one occasion.

Now, no one's life depended on whether he was faithful or unfaithful to his wife. He was pretty certain that it was a choice with which he was going to be presented, sooner or later, one in which he would have to make his decision carefully. It was a problem with which he had been occupied for a large part of the day as he walked behind Linda along the trail through the forest. Linda was probably the most vulnerable and the most destructible of the three of them.

So where did her interest lie? If her involvement with him developed and he refused, as he would, to leave Mrs. Quarshie, what might that do to her?

And Mrs. Quarshie. Amiably he thought of her fury and the fight she would put up to keep him. Then he thought of the pain it might cause her and he knew that he had no right to make her suffer. Suppose she left him? He had no illusions about her value to him. He would, he knew, survive without her but some vital part of his spirit would leave with her.

The sweat trickled off the ends of his eyebrows and he wiped the side of his face with the back of his hand. No, there must be no intimacy between him and Linda, he decided, if only—the thought suddenly struck him—because it could well have been what Joyboy hoped for, a scandal which might destroy all three of them.

"Well," Linda said as they were pushed towards the hut they would share, "seems like we are going to get to sleep together. I am going to insist that they let me take a bath. Do

you think the river is safe?" She spoke in a light, half-joking, brittle tone of voice.

When Quarshie asked the headman if they could bathe the answer was, "Only when you go for water all two same time, same place, den I kin watch 'um all two."

To which Linda replied, "If we are going to sleep together I guess we might as well bathe in the same tub."

So they bathed, watched by the headman, with Linda still wearing her cloth and Quarshie his pants. When they got back to the hut they took off their wet clothes, making a screen between them of one of the twelve-yard lengths of cloth. Then they each used one of the cloths as nightwear, binding it around themselves almost in the form of a bandage.

When they had settled on their blankets, which they used as mattresses, Quarshie said, "Loosen the cloth a bit and use it to cover your head, arms, feet and legs like the Africans do. It may make it a little more difficult to breathe but it will protect you from some of the mosquitoes."

After that, for a while, there was silence.

Then Linda said, "If it had not been for you I guess I could have been dead, or raped, already. Or, so sick and frightened I might as well be dead."

To which Quarshie replied from the folds of his cloth, "You are a brave woman. We will get out of this somehow. Now go to sleep because you have to nurse your strength; we may still have a long way to go."

It could have been a dismissal, or a snub, which was the way Linda took it.

"Yes, Your Excellency." She bit out the answer tersely.

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An hour later he was shaken awake and heard her whispering urgently. "Wake up, please. Wake up."

"What's the matter?" he mumbled.

"There is something big crawling on the top of the hut. I'm frightened."

Quarshie turned on his back and lowered the cloth so that his head was exposed.

"There. There it is. You hear it?"

"It's probably a spider. There are some here that are as big as your hand. It won't hurt you."

"I . . . I don't like it." The distress in her voice was genuine.

Quarshie had closed his eyes and was already half asleep again so she shook his shoulder a second time rather timidly.

"I'm sorry, Quarshie," she told him, "I'm a nuisance. If it wasn't for me you would probably have been able to get away a long time ago." She fought an instinct to cry and Quarshie could hear it in the way she spoke.

Resignedly he stretched his arm out and she took the gesture as he meant she should and pulled her blanket over until it was next to his. Then she also moved over and lay close against him with her head on his shoulder.

He closed his arm around her and told her, "Relax. The spider won't bother you. Aba's amulets are very strong ju ju. And don't apologise. If anyone is to blame for this trouble we are in you can point at me. I trusted someone in Sekodé and I should have known better. It was a bad mistake. Now sleep. I won't let anything happen to you." Even in his own ears he sounded reassuring though he was showing a confidence he did not really feel.

Her body was warm and firm against his but well insulated by the shroud-like bindings of grey baft.

"Here, cover your head, like I told you." And he helped her with his free hand to get the cloth into the right position.

He was pleased to find that he did not have to make any effort to ignore what he would normally have regarded as an instinctive response to holding a woman close. He felt affection for her, but without any sexual undertones. He hoped it would always be like that.

For her part Linda was too relieved and content to feel rebuffed for a second time. Perhaps, she thought, his response —like that of a concerned and warm-hearted brother—was

all she wanted of him. She knew now that he was prepared to give her something, some quality of friendship that went beyond the formality of being protective and maintaining an attitude of responsibility. For the moment it was all she asked for, or needed.

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They trekked and bivouacked one more day and night before they came to the fort. By that time Linda's face and any other part of her body that had accidently been exposed during the evening were so covered with mosquito bites that she might have been suffering from a bad case of chicken pox. She complained of a severe headache, pains in her stomach and, despite the heat, a chill, so Quarshie's sympathy and patience were very important.

On the evening before their arrival at the fort the women porters and the guide from the village had been dismissed and the guards and Quarshie had to carry their headloads again.

The final approach to the fort was across a half-mile-long spit of sand reinforced on both sides with boulders. On either side of the spit and right up to the boulders there were mangrove swamps, which had spread enormously since the fort had first been built in the mid-sixteenth century by the Portuguese. Now the small, circular battlemented building was little more than a stone stud, nearly a mile from the open sea, engulfed in a forest of mangroves which spread out along the coast for fifteen or twenty miles in each direction.

When Fort Goncala Ferriera had been built it had stood clear of the land at the end of a sand spit guarding the entrance to a small, almost landlocked bay, which provided shelter for the ships engaged in the slave trade. At the same time a swamp, which stretched inland for miles and already contained some mangrove trees, had drained into the bay through a broad barrier of sand.

Thinking to clear the swamps and thus expedite the passage of slaves to the ships in the bay, a Dutchman had, some years later, cut a wide channnel through the sand barrier which had

acted as a porous retaining wall. The result was that the streams which had fed the swamp gradually turned into a broad, slow-running river that provided exactly the sort of habitat in which mangrove trees flourished.

The last time Goncala Ferriera had been occupied was when it had been used as a detention camp by the British during the days when Akhana had been a colony. Those who had been interned there were dissident politicians who had been agitating for independence. At that time it had been fairly habitable and heavy iron gates had been hung to close the only serviceable entrance.

There was one other hole in the ten-foot-thick walls. It had once been used, when the fort had served as a barracoon, as a sally port through which the slaves had been driven on their hands and knees out to the canoes that had waited to take them to the ships. The hole was closed by an iron grating and opened onto one of the thickest sections of the swamp.

The task of supervising the political prisoners had been given to a white police superintendent. Feeling that it was best that they be left to their own devices, he had built for himself and the guards another minor fortress which completely straddled the sand spit and even reached out with barbed wire into the swamps on either side. The new building stood about a hundred yards from the iron gates, and the police superintendent's claim that it made it impossible to escape from Goncala Ferriera was proved over a period of two years.

Wishing to be rid of the responsibility of protecting Linda from his guards, the headman decided to follow the example set by his predecessor, the police superintendent. He told his men to settle in the building outside the walls of the fort and then, with one man carrying a sack of rice and another carrying a sack of dried fish, he personally escorted Quarshie and Linda to the fort. After giving Quarshie a box of matches and explaining that the building, the rice, the fish, the salt and the supply of palm oil was all theirs, he left, slamming, bolting and padlocking the great iron gates behind him.

This time, looking at the ugly desolation which surrounded

them, Linda, already sick and miserable, could not contain her tears and she wept on Quarshie's shoulder until he persuaded her to lie in a shady alcove and rest while he prepared some rice gruel with a little palm oil for her, and then he explored their surroundings.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"It is Allah who created you . . . then fed you . . . then caused you to die . . ."

The old man was blind. The eyes between his brown eyelids might have been the shelled whites of hard-boiled eggs. He was dressed in a long robe and wore a small skullcap, both made of white cotton. In his right hand he held a long stick while his left hand was perched on a youth's shoulder like the claw of an ancient chicken.

In a quavering voice he said, "It is the word of the Prophet . . . Allah has proclaimed that the best and most beautiful of his creations is a compassionate man who gives alms. Anything that will bring a smile upon the face of others is a good deed and is the love of one's neighbours.

"'How can I honour the memory of my mother?' asked a disciple. 'By water,' answered the Prophet. 'Dig a well in her memory and give the water to the thirsty.'

"Allah Akbar. La Ila ha alla' allahu. Muhammed rasulu 'llah."

Arimi—for the youth was Arimi, also dressed in a white robe and wearing a white skullcap on his shaven head—held the old man's begging bowl and his shoulder was clamped in the old man's left hand. He also was beginning to find the continual chanting from the Koran and the begging for alms very tedious.

Yet his role as the old man's guide and companion provided him with a wonderful disguise and enabled him to spend most of the daylight hours, every day, on watch outside

Joyboy's office in Biliani. The old beggar was being well paid by the perm sec to accept direction from Arimi.

And Arimi had added his own affliction: he claimed to be dumb. This saved him from having to quote from the Koran, or to speak Hausa, which was the old man's language. Privately, they spoke in the dialect of the people of Port St. Mary.

Arimi had renewed his contact with the two Biliani boys who had worked with him before. They had been amused by his get-up but had been all too willing to co-operate when Arimi had offered them each more money than they could hustle in the marketplace in a year. Their task was to remain ready for any requirement that Arimi might have and they stayed hidden in an alleyway less than half a block from the blind man.

Of course, Arimi had arrived too late to see Quarshie and Linda being taken away and he had been on his way to Biliani when Mrs. Quarshie had been going to Port St. Mary, so he knew nothing of what had happened to them.

His task, he felt, was a colourless one, but important. Though Jedawi had other men in Biliani, Arimi could well provide the most vital information if Joyboy made any moves that were other than routine.

The claw on his left shoulder tightened again. It was a sign that the old man was going to start another plea for alms.

"Whatever you put out as usury to increase it with the substance of others shall have no increase from Allah but whatever ye shall give in alms, as seeking the face of Allah, shall be doubled to you.

"It is Allah who created you . . . then fed you . . . then caused you to die . . . then will make you alive. Praise Him and praise Muhammed his Prophet."

The words flowed almost continuously and had become a background to almost every thought which passed through Arimi's mind, making uneasy bedfellows for his anxieties, while he watched and waited.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

". . . I never, never dreamed up a situation like this one."

"I realise, madam, that he is your husband. That's why the bandits who kidnapped him let you free. So that you could come and put pressure on me. You were not particularly valuable to them in terms of dollars and cents but because of the power you can use to try to get the ransom paid you are, to them, without equal." Colonel Jedawi paused for breath, which was a mistake because Mrs. Quarshie moved into the gap like a well-equipped and indignant panzer division.

"The world will condemn you, Colonel, if he and that woman are killed. The international newspapers have already got hold of the story. What is money? Pieces of paper. Will you let a man and a woman die because you cannot print a few more pieces of paper? Why can't you get the notes numbered in some way so that they could be traced? You would be the first man to have done that and everybody would say how clever you are. You could . . ."

Jedawi reopened fire. "My dear lady," he interrupted forcefully, "your concern, of course, is natural and does you credit but you are losing touch with reality. One does not just print one and a half million dollars like one writes a letter. We can't print them here and it would take weeks to start the U. S. Government moving on it . . ."

"Even for one of their own people?"

"Even for one of their own."

"Then you are just going to have to pay it out of whatever

money you have available in Akhana. You must. And now. They won't wait forever."

"You've had no note from your husband to say that he is alive, have you?" It was an attack on the flank.

Miserably: "No. Only the telephone call."

"Tell me about that again."

"At four o'clock this morning. The phone rang and this strange voice said, 'Mrs. Quarshie, your husband is still alive and well but he won't be much longer if we don't get the bread. Next time I won't make a phone call to remind you to get some action. I will send you that gold ring he wears and'"—Mrs. Quarshie had difficulty speaking—"'and his finger will be in it.'" She blew her nose.

Jedawi turned to the perm sec, "And you've had all the four A.M. calls checked and there were none that came from outside Port St. Mary?"

"That is correct, sir."

The colonel examined the gold letter-opener on his desk as if he had never seen it before, turning it over and over in his hands. "I am sorry, Mrs. Quarshie, but I am not going to give in to blackmail. The ransom will not be paid. I believe your husband would back me up on that decision. We have everybody poised to move as soon as there is the least sign of our being able to save the doctor and the American woman. But we must be patient and move cautiously. Their hostages are no use to them dead. So they, too, will want to keep them alive as long as they can. And one thing I am sure we share is the belief that if any man can get himself out of this kind of difficulty it will be Quarshie."

"And that child"—it was Mrs. Quarshie's turn to move in to attack from a different position—"that boy, Arimi, who you sent off to risk his life as well. You are determined to deprive me of the two people who mean more to me than all the rest of this, this ant heap of creatures you call humans."

Colonel Jedawi said, "The boy is doing what he wants to do. He is also being watched—you might almost say guarded—by our men in Biliani. Nothing can happen to him. But I

am using him because I don't consider that I have anyone as intelligent or capable as he is.

"Mrs. Quarshie, go home and wait. Those are my orders. I am giving you a task that is more difficult than any I have given to anyone else and I know it. I am doing everything I can. I have an operational control room set up here . . . as if we were at war. Do you understand? We are watching and listening everywhere. And we are prepared to act immediately. But there is one thing we have to remember—as soon as the criminals think we are onto them, then their hostages are of no further value to them. In fact, they will be a hindrance, one they will want to dispose of as quickly as possible.

"Trust your husband, Mrs. Quarshie. That's the one thing you have to do. In fact, it is the only thing you *can* do."

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"Fear Allah, then with all your might . . . and hear Him and obey Him . . . and give alms for your own well-being; for such as are saved from their own greed shall prosper.

"If you lend Allah a generous loan He will double it and will forgive you your sins, for Allah is grateful . . ."

Arimi's resistance to the continuous fatigue and anxiety his task forced on him was beginning to grow thin. He wondered several times whether he was any more effective than his blind companion would be. What was the use of being able to see if there was nothing to look at?

Joyboy came and went as if there was nothing at all unusual happening.

The sun shone and Arimi and the blind man followed the shadow of a tree as it moved from left to right along the street. Line squalls brought heavy showers so that they had to press together in the inadequate shelter of a doorway. And somewhere nearby an oriole sang its song of entreaty. It let fall three notes in a descending scale and then paused as if waiting to see if someone would confirm that it had the notes in the right order before providing the fourth one. There was always this hesitancy which, when repeated many, many

times, could produce in those who listened to it a kind of madness.

And here came the Koran again—or was it some other Islamic text: "Be in the world as if you were a stranger, or a traveller; when morning time comes expect not the evening and when evening comes expect not the morning; and prepare as long as you are in good health for sickness, and so long as you are alive for death."

Arimi did not understand what the old man said but caught the tone and wondered if he felt ill because of the food the boys had brought him or whether his head could make him feel sick.

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Linda *was* sick—very sick. Her cheeks were flushed, her head ached, she had a touch of bronchitis and the ghost of a cough. When Quarshie examined her abdomen it was distended and she told him it hurt when he touched it. She had a temperature though, as far as he could tell, her pulse had not risen as quickly as her temperature.

He had folded his blanket on top of hers to give her something softer to lie upon and he had found a wide stone shelf in an embrasure for a bed where she was out of the sun and, because of the thickness of the walls, fairly cool.

He kept putting compresses on her forehead and sat beside her holding her hand. He found she was slightly deaf so that he had to speak more loudly than he did normally.

"It's too early yet to tell why you feel as sick as you do. But at least you have what only presidents and kings have, your own private physician in constant attendance," he told her. "You need unlimited bed rest and that we certainly can provide. For the rest remember that most of the fevers and sicknesses people contract out here cure themselves if one treats them carefully. So, try not to worry, leave that to me. I am going to talk to the headman and try to get him to have you carried back to Biliani, or at least to send for drugs."

With a tongue that felt as if it had grown dry, thicker and

coated with felt, Linda said, "When I was a little girl . . . I used to . . . fantasy myself into all kinds of strange dreams . . . but I never, I never dreamed up anything . . . anything to match this." She tried to smile but it turned into a grimace. "Oh, my head. God, I must look awful." She touched the blankets and the wall languidly and looked back at Quarshie and asked, "Is all this . . . is it real?"

"Better, perhaps, to think of it as being unreal, Linda. Pretend that it is not happening." And Quarshie thought to himself that the reality looked as if it could be typhoid and, if that was the case, unless she was gotten to a hospital soon, the next reality could be death.

CHAPTER TWENTY

"Port St. Mary is still very excited about the kidnapping."

After four more days of keeping watch on Joyboy, Arimi's perception was becoming distorted. The brilliance of the sunlight was so dazzling that he could hardly bear to look at it and the shadows had become so dense that they were impenetrable. The old man's voice no longer had the kind of sound that could have any human origin, rather it sounded like the grinding of the steel-shod wheels on a cart sounded as it was pushed over a road surfaced with concrete.

Something inside him convinced him that Quarshie was still alive but there was no way of knowing how much longer he would stay that way. And Arimi felt the threat to Quarshie as a threat to himself.

What would it mean to die? And how would one confront death when one saw it coming? They were questions that had never occurred to him before. Was it like the ashes of a wood fire that were dispersed by the wind? Did the dead, in the end, blow away like that, leaving something invisible behind that joined the ancestors? Were the ancestors in the air one breathed? Did they pass in and out of people as each one breathed?

Arimi was so absorbed in his thoughts, set against the blind man's chanting and the tremendous contrast of light and shade, that he almost missed Ruby's appearance, the one event of significance that occurred during his otherwise fruitless vigil.

The police superintendent had gone upstairs just before her arrival. She was obviously a foreigner, though she was vaguely familiar. She was dressed and made-up in a way no Biliani woman was. The style of her clothes was African, but with a subtle difference. Her head tie had a pattern woven into it with gold thread. Her cloth, which she wore in the form of a tunic blouse, over an ankle-length skirt of the same material, was a locally hand-made tie-dyed satin. And she wore shoes with wedge heels. Also, her bracelets (and there were many of them) were of gold and . . . it was her scarlet fingernails which sparked his memory of the scene in the Sacred Grove. She had been there. He remembered her sitting over on his left.

Now he had all his wits about him again. He left the blind man for a moment and went to alert the other two boys. He gave them more money and told them to watch him closely so that they could join him quickly if he needed them.

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Upstairs in Joyboy's office there was, for the first time, a feeling of anxiety.

"How does your man know these things to be true?" Joyboy asked petulantly. He disliked Ruby's—to him—servile acceptance of her orders from the American and the way she had of suggesting subtly that although he was a district commissioner and an ex-minister he was, by comparison, both ignorant and foolish.

"Men talk to women," she replied. "Port St. Mary is still very excited about the kidnapping. Everyone is talking about it. So it is natural that some of my girls should ask seemingly innocent questions. He pays them well if they give him good information. Biliani, the reports say, is full of Jedawi's plain-clothes men. There are commando soldiers on stand-by at the airport. He says you should both disappear." She did not add that Jo Jo had told her that the two men she was talking to were so "goddamn stupid" that they would certainly make a mess of everything for a second time and that she must get rid

of them. "They're bush bush niggers," he had told her, "and the best thing that can happen to them is that they go back to the bush, as deep into it as they can and as far away as possible."

"If they won't go?" she had asked him.

"Then we'll broadcast the whole story about what they have been up to in the Saysay villages to the government and the press. But not before we clean up on the ransom deal. Then they can sort out their problems with the military. We could have some good times together with a million but"—he had stood up and taken out his gas lighter again, turning up the flame as high as it would go—"don't you go making any mistakes, either, or I might have to put a personal brand or two on that beautiful body of yours."

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Arimi saw her come down the outside stairs leaving the two men behind. He had to make a quick decision: he called the two boys and told each of them to take one of the two men and to stay behind them wherever they went. Then he told the old blind man to have his fellow northerners put him on a bus back to Port St. Mary.

By that time Ruby was almost out of sight, so he hurried after her. When she took a taxi, he took one too, paying a substantial sum in advance, and told the driver to keep Ruby's taxi just in sight until they got to wherever she was going.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

". . . our lives are at risk from the moment we are born."

Quarshie was sure of his diagnosis. Linda was suffering from typhoid fever. It was a disease with fairly clearly defined symptoms and, if there were no complications, a reasonably regular phase by phase development. However, the possible complications were numerous.

In most cases the patient's condition worsened steadily over a period of about three weeks, though death could occur during the second week. Generally, the third week was the most critical, and if the sufferer survived it, he could expect to recover.

Without a bacteriological examination he could not, of course, be sure of his diagnosis but on the basis of the fact that she had a rash, an enlarged spleen and, on the evidence of the behaviour of her temperature and pulse there was very little doubt in his mind that her survival depended on her hospitalisation. With all the urgency he could muster he explained this to the headman when they met.

Twice a day, no matter what her condition, the gates had been unlocked and, since they opened inwards, Quarshie had had to pull them back and stand in the opening. This procedure always took place following a heavy pounding on the gates to indicate that they were unlocked at around nine in the morning and six in the evening.

Once every day Quarshie had to carry Linda to the gate, reply to a few questions about her health and accept the head-

man's order, "You be doctah. You go stop dis sickness one time. You catch sabee?"

After the fourth day Quarshie gave up arguing. After the second day, with a sense of urgency, he had already started preparing to make an escape. Now he lay on his back under a gibbous moon listening to Linda's stertorous breathing and reviewing the work he had done on his project—a project which had reached the first stage of completion a couple of hours earlier.

From the beginning the headman had evidently been convinced that escape from the fort was impossible and had therefore felt no need to carry out more than the most cursory inspection after they had arrived.

Quarshie, however, had decided almost at once that an escape could be made. They had to get away; therefore, it had to be possible. Also, unlike the headman, he had made a most complete inspection of the fort's interior and on the second day had made a discovery. He had found a coil of copper wire and two empty, greasy jerry cans.

The fort's previous occupants had evidently been provided with electricity produced by a diesel generator. The power, it seemed, had been carried by overhead lines to the guardhouse, which spanned the causeway. It would, of course, had made no sense for the prisoners to have had electricity while the white police superintendent and his men were left to depend on kerosene light.

In one of the rooms built into the thickness of the fort's walls there was the greasy concrete bed on which the engine and the generator had stood. Obviously scavengers had been into the fort after it had been abandoned and they had carried away everything they could. For some reason or other, however, it looked as if the man who had found the wire and the jerry cans had hidden them so that he could come back and claim them later. They were buried in a corner of the engine shed and Quarshie came upon them because the grease on the outside of the cans had permeated the soil above them so that

no greenery had grown there. Thinking to find perhaps an oil tank that had been built underground, Quarshie had prodded the area with a short piece of steel rod which he had found rusting in the weeds in the courtyard. After pushing the rod into the soil two or three times he had struck one of the jerry cans and had shovelled the earth away with his hands.

It was not, however, until he had made another important discovery later in the day that he started to make plans to escape. Poking around it, he had found that the cast-iron grille over the sally port was loose and that by chipping away at the top and the sides with his rusty iron rod he was able to free it and pull it into the fort. The hole was about three feet six inches in diameter and gave onto a small apron of rock that was enclosed by the swamp. It was invisible to those on the other side of the fort because it was screened by the mangroves.

Even if the guards had known that the sally port could be used as an escape tunnel the question they would probably have asked would be "an escape to where?" No one whom they would have considered sane would try to wade or swim through the swamp because the hazards would be far too daunting.

Quarshie had another approach to the problem. Back inside the fort he had found, on the first day, the two other elements he needed to give substance to his ideas. One was a door. Its hinges had rusted away and it lay on the ground outside the doorway it had been built to fit. Quarshie thought that the room beyond it might have been the powder magazine because it was ventilated only by holes in the wall. Also the door was unusually long and thick. He found that it was just possible to get it out through the sally port and he dragged it out and left it on the rock.

His other resource consisted of three long, slender telegraph poles, which had probably been used to carry the power lines from the generator to the guardhouse outside. Termites had got into them and they appeared to have broken off at ground level, leaving the part which had been above the ground fairly

sound. Some tidy-minded person had, at some time, dragged them into the fort.

His first task had been to cut the telegraph poles into lengths that were approximately the same width as the door. It had been a tedious job because, having no saw, he had had to burn them through in the right places. This had meant constant attention to ensure that the flames did not spread along the wood and that the fire he built underneath them was kept as hot as possible and made to burn in a very narrow area. At the same time he had used the fire to heat the end of his iron rod until it was red hot. This he had done over and over again, and then, using it as a tool, he had burned pairs of holes along the outer edges of the door. He worked with his fire only at night so that the breeze took the little column of smoke out towards the sea.

All this activity took place on the apron of rock outside the sally port. He had no shortage of fuel because the British had had innumerable lean-to structures built against the inside walls and the wood had, over the years, rotted. It was now dry and brittle and, along with the tar paper, which had been used to insulate the walls, had made a very hot fire. It had, however, been slow work collecting the firewood, though this was an activity he could carry out during the day without arousing suspicion.

Of course, every day he had also replaced the cast-iron grille over the sally port, just in case the headman had decided to inspect the fort.

On the night of the fifth day he had finished the work with the wood and had also broken the heavy copper wire into lengths in the same way as he had the poles. Then all he had left to do was to wire the lengths of the poles to the underside of the door so that they formed a continuous row. To the last row and extending beyond it he wired the two jerry cans in an upright position with only their bottoms projecting slightly below the logs.

An hour earlier, as the moon had started to rise, he had tested his contraption. At high tide he had launched it into an

opening in the mangroves, and having loaded the (as he thought of it) forward end with two heavy rocks to represent Linda's weight he had then knelt on the back end where the jerry cans provided the most buoyancy. It had worked—not perfectly, but approximately the way he had envisaged it would with the front slightly raised so that it would tend to ride over the pneumatophores, the strange roots which grow up out of the water around mangrove trees like a stubble of submarine periscopes. They were the elements which, he knew, would make the task of moving through the swamps the most difficult and in some ways the most dangerous. Their wood is tough, fibrous and comes to a point as sharp, on occasion, as the lethal end of a throwing spear.

It was Quarshie's hope that the rounded parts of the logs would bend the pneumatophores away from the raft so that they would pass under it in that position. He hoped that the raft would ride with its fore end higher than the rear, where he would kneel to pole the thing forward.

He did not know for certain how far he would have to travel through the mangroves before he reached dry land; he hoped it would not be more than twenty miles.

It was a desperate venture but one that he had to undertake. There was still some hope that Linda's life might be saved if he could get her to a hospital. And, so far as he knew, Mrs. Quarshie was still in Joyboy's hands; he had to be free to go to her rescue. Finally, there was the problem of the guards: the headman obeyed his orders and because he had a gun he could control the others. But if he once lost his gun to one of them, then there would be no guarantee how the rest would behave, especially where Linda was concerned.

To the moon he said softly, "We make ourselves what we are and our lives are at risk from the moment we are born.

Most of the chances we take are never revealed to us because so many dangers pass by unseen. Why, therefore, should we run away from risks which we can see and judge?"

Then he thought of Aba's charm, which still hung around his neck, and, smiling, he put his hand on it. "Dr. Quarshie,"

he told it, "man of medicine and modern science, has faith in you."

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Arimi arrived home very late in the evening, tired, sick at heart and angry to be greeted by an ecstatic Mrs. Quarshie. She was not at all concerned, at least to begin with, with his bad humour.

He was alive and well and that was all that mattered. Arimi bore restlessly with her fussing, with being hugged, told that he looked tired and that he must be hungry, told that he should have a shower and get into some clean clothes and told again and again how happy she was to see him.

Then, only ten minutes later, it was all over and Mrs. Quarshie was listening intently to all that he had to tell her though she was uncomfortable, but did not say so, about his shaven head. It reminded her too harshly of the fact that his skull was all too vulnerable. She had to use great will power not to take him in her lap and hold him tightly against her breast.

Nonetheless she said in as soothing a voice as she could muster, "So the woman got away. Tell me again how that happened."

"The driver went through a red light and the police stopped him. He was trying to help—the driver, I mean. He wanted to keep close to the other car so that he would not lose it. Of course, it got away."

"And you bribed the policeman to let the driver go?"

"I gave the driver the money to bribe him. I was afraid that if the policeman got an idea of who I was he might have taken us both to the police station and that could have wasted a lot of time."

Mrs. Quarshie nodded solemnly and said, "Sometimes it's a good thing our policemen can be bribed so easily. And afterwards?"

"I went looking for her. She's the kind who would go to all the noisy bars, you know, where the . . . prostitutes go." He

looked up a little anxiously at Mrs. Quarshie. Her face was expressionless.

"But you did not find her."

"No."

"You could not have any mistake about her? I mean about her being a prostitute?" She used the word more boldly than he had.

"No."

"Why do you think she is important?"

Arimi told her about his having seen Ruby at the fetish grove with the priest and about her visit to Joyboy. "Besides," he went on, "nothing happened in Biliani until she arrived. I saw Joyboy and the policeman come out on the balcony with her and they looked agitated. I am sure she is clever. To dress like that and to wear all that gold means that she must have money, and to have that kind of money, she has to be clever."

"Gold?"

"Yes. Gold earrings, gold rings and lots of gold bracelets."

Mrs. Quarshie looked at Arimi thoughtfully. Presently she said, "Hassan will bring you some food. Lie down and have a good night's sleep. First thing tomorrow we will go out together. I have an idea. I think we shall be able to trace this woman, perhaps quite easily."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"The car careened off the road and struck the trees beside it like a well-aimed skittle ball . . . only the trees did not fall as easily as skittles."

When Joyboy and the police superintendent set out in a police jeep the next day they had decided to take the fate of the hostages into their own hands.

"No cheap crook from the States is going to come over here and tell me what I should do," Joyboy had told his companion. "All these Westerners think they know more about how we should handle our lives than we do—even the criminals! And they always have only one purpose—to profit at our expense. Well, this is one time it's not going to work that way."

Later, when they were some distance along the road, the police superintendent, who was driving, said, "We are being followed. Watch. If I slow up, that car behind us slows up as well. If I speed up it does the same." The superintendent demonstrated.

"Who are they?" Joyboy asked after a few moments.

"Not very clever men. Their car has a Port St. Mary number plate. They must work for Jedawi."

Joyboy frowned and said, "He has declared war, and when someone does that you have the right to defend yourself. About eight miles beyond the village at Dadawa there is a very sharp corner. Take it as fast as you can, then pull off the road and stop quickly. I did not think we would need to use the guns yet." He added as an afterthought, "I hope you are a better shot than I am."

The superintendent said, "In the Army I was a small-arms instructor. You had better get the guns out and see that they are loaded. I will fire a clip from one of them, then you hand me the other one. We must make no mistake, or waste any ammunition."

The men from Port St. Mary were *not* very clever men and it cost them their lives: they rode into the ambush at seventy miles an hour.

The superintendent, almost facing them, shot out both front tyres and raised his gun to aim at the driver. The car careened off the road and struck the trees beside it like a well-aimed skittle ball . . . only the trees did not fall as easily as skittles. The sedan was battered but still standing upright fifty yards from the road when the superintendent took the second gun out of Joyboy's shaking hands and walked over to it. Then at point-blank range he sprayed both those who were dead and those who were alive, but dazed or injured, with the whole of the second clip of bullets.

When he came back he said scornfully, "Marotees," the tribe to which the men belonged. "Bush bush niggers, all of them." He did not know, of course, that those were the same words that Jo Jo had used earlier to describe him. He was also unaware that these were not the only men Jedawi had put on his trail.

In a bus, which stopped at every village along the road, there were two boys who asked everyone they saw whether they had seen a police jeep pass. As the answer was often "yes" they were carried right on to the end of the road where they learned from the people in the village there that not only had the D.C. and the superintendent come through earlier that day but that nine days before a very big man and a white woman with hair the colour of ripe palm nuts had also passed through on their way to Fort Goncala Ferriera, where they were to be detained. As proof that they were telling the truth about the white woman, they showed the boys some of her hair.

It was only on their return journey that someone noticed

the wrecked car beside the road. The women on the bus who saw the shattered bodies of the four Marotee men set up a wail which continued all the way back to Biliani, where the boys spent the night.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

"You are an evil, worthless woman, worse than a vulture . . ."

About the same time that Joyboy and the police superintendent left Biliani, Mrs. Quarshie and Arimi left their house to go into town. Their purpose was to visit every goldsmith in Port St. Mary for, as Mrs. Quarshie said, "This woman could never walk around with that much gold on display without at least one of them knowing her."

It turned out that three of them knew her and that one of them was able to direct them to the place where she worked. There Mrs. Quarshie, using Colonel Jedawi's name rather freely, obtained her private address and a little later they stood on the doorstep of her house knocking at the door.

When Ruby opened it, Mrs. Quarshie walked past her into the house before the woman, who had just woken up, had time to react. As she turned to protest, Arimi slipped past her as well.

Mrs. Quarshie asked him, "Is this the woman?"

"Yes, ma'a."

Ruby at last found her tongue. "I don't understand . . . why are you pushing in here like this?"

"I am Mrs. Quarshie. This is my son. Does that help you to understand what we are doing here?"

Ruby said, slowly with a puzzled expression on her face, "The boy had hair on his head . . . why have you come to see me?"

"I thought it would be better if we discussed our problems

together rather than have Colonel Jedawi send someone. I may say that a mutual friend of ours, Mr. Agropon, knows we are here. At present he is the only person who knows. Like everyone else in Port St. Mary, he is concerned about my husband's kidnapping and is waiting to hear what you may have to tell me about it. So if it should cross your mind to try any tricks remember he will be in touch with the authorities in a few hours if we don't call back to see him quite soon."

"Why should I know anything about Dr. Quarshie's kidnapping?"

Arimi said, "You answered that question yourself when you said I had had hair on my head. Also I saw you yesterday visit the district commissioner in Biliani. We know—and Colonel Jedawi knows now, as well—that he played a part in the kidnapping. You played a part, too."

After a moment or two she said coolly, "You had better come in and sit down." Then: "Do you mind if I wash my face before I join you?"

Mrs. Quarshie said, "Arimi will sit and wait. I will come with you."

The two women looked at each other. Ruby was taller and somewhat more slender than Mrs. Quarshie, who was round and as solid as a cannon ball. Eventually Ruby shrugged and led the way off the small verandah into a central living room where Arimi sat down. Mrs. Quarshie followed her into a bedroom that was heavily perfumed and with as many frills on the furniture, she thought to herself, as there are on a Wolof woman's petticoat.

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The contrast between Mrs. Quarshie's surroundings and those of her husband's could not possibly have been more extreme. In the fort the heat of noon was as fierce as that of a badly ventilated steam laundry.

It was not the heat, however, that was the cause of Linda's torpidity but her typhoid fever. The pupils of her eyes were dilated and her lips were cracked and dry. The worst sign was

that she had diarrhoea; she also suffered from an almost insatiable thirst. Quarshie gave her constant attention, being gentle and firm at the same time, reassuring her as often as he could that she was going to get better and hoping that this gave her some comfort. The only food he could give her was, occasionally, a little rice gruel.

He was aware of the fact, without giving it too much importance, that without her he could have escaped quite easily and much earlier on. Though he did, at moments, hope fervently that the sacrifice he was making would not affect Mrs. Quarshie adversely. But a man can only act, he told himself, on the basis of what he can determine to be facts, not on fears that he cannot substantiate.

Quarshie also realised that if there was to be any hope at all of getting Linda into a hospital, they would have to leave the fort that evening and all he could take with him, apart from the blankets she lay on and the cloth he used to cover her, would be their two mugs, one pot full of water and one pot of rice gruel.

The tide would be high enough to launch the raft again at about eight o'clock. The moon would rise a couple of hours later: it was all that he would have to help him light his way through the mangroves.

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Mrs. Quarshie had a score of her own to settle with the kidnappers and it was something she was prepared to delegate to the police or the Army. Besides, Jedawi himself had said that the moment the criminals think that we are onto them, their hostages will become a hindrance which they will want to get out of their way as quickly as possible. So she had to keep her information to herself.

She had decided to try to save Quarshie without any concern for politics or diplomacy. She was sure that the colonel was more interested in holding on to power and the benefits for Akhana than he was over her husband's life. And she did

not allow any thoughts about the American woman to come into her mind.

She became so cold and ruthless in the way she tackled Ruby that Arimi was shocked. When they came back to the living room Mrs. Quarshie started the conversation. "You are an evil, worthless woman, worse than a vulture, or those miserable bitches that scavenge on the garbage heaps around the town. You don't deserve to be treated like a human being . . . and I am not going to treat you as one. No, don't get up . . . I am not bluffing when I tell you that I could persuade Colonel Jedawi to have you beaten to death. He would consider that it is what you deserve as much as I do. So sit still and listen to me and perhaps I might be able to convince the colonel to treat you leniently because you helped me to find the men who are involved in the kidnapping of my husband."

"But you have no evidence that I have had anything to do with the kidnapping. All you know is what this boy tells you."

"I saw you. I saw you in Biliani, too. So, I expect, did several of Colonel Jedawi's men."

Ruby shrugged and was surprised when Mrs. Quarshie suddenly slapped her face with a force that spun her head to one side so fiercely that she hurt her neck. They were sitting in basket-work chairs, facing each other, and as she recovered from the blow Ruby found Mrs. Quarshie standing over her.

"I tell you for the last time that you are in a very dangerous position. If you make me this angry once more my son will go fetch the soldiers." She spoke very slowly. "They will beat you to death."

Ruby's strong sense of self-preservation cautioned her to be careful. Obviously the woman was barely holding herself in control and did, in fact, have powerful friends. She straightened a little in her chair and said, "As always, I am being used by everyone. Now, you want to use me, too."

"With this difference," Mrs. Quarshie told her. "Others always pay for using you, like cheap goods in a store. In this case, if you do not help me it is you who will pay—and it will be with your life."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"When you betray a man it is uncomfortable to have to watch him die."

The four porters that Joyboy had engaged in the village to help them get to the fort told him that the water would be too deep, but he decided to ford the second river anyway, with the result that the jeep bogged down midstream.

Joyboy was furious. His anger was directed at the porters because they could not push the vehicle out. He stood with his hands on the top of the windshield, looking like a hysterical monkey, shouting imprecations at everyone. He was not dressed for trekking on foot through the forest. Also, since he had been a member of the elite all his life, he had rarely gone without shoes so the soles of his feet were as soft as any white man's, which made it impossible for him to walk barefooted as the porters did.

Reluctantly he allowed himself to be carried ashore. Once on the bank he continued to chatter with rage and when the porters refused to hurry in unloading the jeep, he cut a thin branch off a tree and whipped them with it, not hurting their flesh as much as their pride.

Then, when he insisted that they make a carrying chair for him and that two of them carry him while the other two carried the supplies, they went off into the forest saying that they had to cut the right wood to make the chair.

They did not come back. Instead, they forded the river higher upstream and returned to their village.

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When Mrs. Quarshie and Arimi, accompanied by Ruby, returned home they found the two boys Arimi had employed in Biliani waiting for them. Mrs. Quarshie had had a change of heart about Ruby. She had come to understand that it might be easier to outmanoeuvre the woman than to frighten her into giving information. It was with this thought in mind that she insisted that Ruby accompany her home so that she could listen to Mrs. Quarshie talk to Colonel Jedawi on the phone. She wanted to establish the fact that her claim to being in the confidence of the head of state was not a bluff.

Finding the two boys waiting for her and listening to their story provided an unexpected impetus to the force she was using to reduce Ruby to a state of mind in which she understood that full co-operation with Mrs. Quarshie was the only course open to her.

For her part, after having heard Mrs. Quarshie tell Jedawi that she had important information for him, Ruby realised that she was going to have to be very astute. If Joyboy was captured she had no faith in his capability to withstand any kind of interrogation, especially physical forms of persuasion. So, while Mrs. Quarshie fussed over getting the boys something to eat, she sat and pondered the options open to her. She had no compunction about double-crossing Jo Jo. She was in a much better financial position than she had been in when she had first started working for him. Shrewdly she had turned most of the money he had given her into gold—all of it in a form that she could wear and thus carry with her wherever she went.

When Mrs. Quarshie came back from taking care of the boys—she had left Arimi with them to act as host—Ruby asked, "What do I stand to gain by co-operating? I mean, certainly if I don't, you can make things very bad for me but that won't help you. So how would you make it worth my while?"

"What do you want?" was her blunt response.

"I have a profession. One of these"—she touched a gold

bracelet on her arm—"will pay my fare to Dakar. Another will get me through any immigration problems I may have there." She counted four more bracelets. "And I shall have reserves that will enable me to set myself up in business."

"And what are you prepared to offer me if I agree to those terms?"

"There is only one man who is behind the whole thing, the problems of the Saysay people and the kidnapping. I know where he lives and I know a lot about him. Information you could use in any way you want to. Only . . ."

"Only what?"

"I don't want to have any contact with him. When you betray a man it is uncomfortable to have to watch him die. Besides, if he could, he would kill me."

"You are saying that you will tell me all that I need to know, but that you don't want to have any part in it?"

"Exactly."

"Good. I would rather have it that way. If you were with me I would have to watch you all the time in case you betrayed me as well." Mrs. Quarshie frowned, concentrating. "But there is one thing. You won't leave for Dakar until after my . . . my work is finished."

Ruby shook her head.

"Then you would no longer need me and you could turn me over to the Army. Listen, I have nothing to gain and everything to lose if I fail you."

Mrs. Quarshie stared at Ruby grimly. "When the only hold you have on a snake is by its tail then it can turn around and bite you. I want to make sure that you don't fail me."

Ruby shrugged and said, "Then there is no way."

"Yes, there is."

"How?"

Mrs. Quarshie said sternly, "I would never dishonour my name by going back on my word. You must accept that, or I call Colonel Jedawi again and, though it may take a little longer, he will find ways of getting it out of you and then he will probably have you executed. No, rather than follow that

course, you will book your seat on the plane for the day after tomorrow but Arimi will keep your ticket. You will go to the airport in time for your flight and if the information you have given me is correct he will bring the ticket to you there." She got up and went across the room to the telephone and picked up the receiver.

"Now, shall I dial the castle," she asked, "or do you accept what I have said?"

"And between now and when I leave?"

"You will stay here locked in a room until it is time to go to the airport. Hassan will guard you. And don't get any ideas about being able to work your charms on him. His three wives live here and they are all very jealous women."

Ruby stared at her dully and Mrs. Quarshie started to dial.

Ruby got up, went to her, took the telephone away from her and said softly, "It shall be as you want it to be. There are many small things about the man that I think you should know. For instance, that he is superstitious. I think such information might be more important than bigger things. You see? I am proving my good faith so that you . . . as a woman of your word"—there was a touch of sarcasm in her tone—"might perhaps be as generous to me as I am being to you."

When Arimi looked in on them later he was amazed to see Mrs. Quarshie listening to Ruby with close attention. What surprised him most was the fact that there was a wicked light of mischief in Mrs. Quarshie's eyes.

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"Where are we going?" Linda asked as Quarshie manoeuvred her through the sally port. She sounded as though she was speaking through a mouthful of cotton wool and she did not seem to hear what he said when he replied, "I am going to get you to a hospital."

Then he touched the amulet on his chest and added to himself, "Dear God, may that be true."

The raft was already more than half afloat as Quarshie laid the four thicknesses of blanket on it and lifted Linda onto

them with her feet towards the forward end. Then he covered her with one of the white cloths and loaded his few provisions. Finally, as quietly as possible, he pushed off and, kneeling just behind her head used a long wooden frame to pole his way out into a small open area of water which lay between some clumps of mangroves. As the raft moved over them the pneumatophores rattled softly and the sound was like a child pulling a stick along a fence.

It was perhaps fortunate, he thought, that Linda was in such a state of torpor that she did not recognise the frightening aspects of their situation. No scene in any horror movie could have been more terrifying. Though their bases were flooded by the height of the tide, each tree in the mangrove swamp emerged from the darkness as though its ghostly twisted trunk was riding on an immobilised octopus, though one with many more than eight tentacles—these were, in fact, the trees' roots, which clutched downwards into the slimy bottom. Each tree was an aberration; something that had been born deformed and now lived in a kingdom of freaks.

On every side there were strange sounds. The slight swell that was all that was left of the waves sighed through the thousands of tunnels under the arching roots. Great bubbles of gas came to the surface and burst, releasing their putrescence into the night air. And never, Quarshie thought, never could so many different sounds have been made by so many different creatures, all of them sinister as they crawled or wriggled, were soft and wet, horny or slimy, cold-blooded or bloodless.

He still had two hours to go before the moon came up to give him some glimmer of light. Though how much there would be even then would depend on how much open space he was able to find because the trees, with their thick furry leaves, stood from six to sixty feet above him, often obscuring the sky.

The only way he could maintain a sense of direction was by constantly observing the slight undulations caused by the remnants of the waves which had first broken in the shallows over

a mile away. As long as they flowed under the raft from the right-hand side he knew he must be heading approximately east, which was the direction in which he wanted to go.

But for how many hours or days would they have to travel? He had very little idea. He would, he expected, do well to cover a mile in four hours.

It was a desperate venture and, if Linda was to survive, a desperate race against time. If he failed to get her to a hospital and she died he could be accused of having made a bad decision and, therefore, of causing her death.

Acknowledging this, he prepared himself for a long struggle which could well end in a lacerating defeat, one that he would never be able to forget.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

"He will have a respect for African ways before we are finished with him, and when we are finished he will be finished too."

By the time Joyboy and the superintendent reached the fort the moon had started on its descent towards the west.

They made a strange-looking pair: the policeman was carrying his district commissioner piggy-back. Joyboy, before moonrise, had caught his foot under the root of a tree and had fallen forwards, spraining his ankle.

In addition to Joyboy, the superintendent was also carrying the two automatic rifles, which were strung around his neck and hung down in front of him. There were also several clips of ammunition in his pocket. He was a very tired man.

The doors of the guardhouse across the causeway leading to the fort were locked and it took their combined voices shouting as loudly as they could to arouse anyone. They were both too exhausted to remonstrate when there was not a single guard awake and they both, immediately, took sleeping mats and fell asleep on the short stubble of grass which lay between the guardhouse and the gates of the fort.

They had three hours to rest before dawn and what was to be a fatal awakening.

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While they slept Mrs. Quarshie was not sleeping. Some instinct told her that Quarshie was involved in a severe struggle.

It was unusual for her ever to lie awake, a fact which doubled her anxiety and made her toss and turn restlessly.

All the time her mind swung like a pendulum between her fear for Quarshie's safety and her own plans for dealing with the man she had already got used to thinking of as Jo Jo. He was dangerously violent. He was superstitious. He was rich. He was armed. He had a criminal record. Ruby said he had committed murder. He was totally Westernised and had no patience with or respect for African ways and customs. He was completely unafraid of the police and with reason because he could buy them off so easily. He was constantly trying to expand his business and a large part of it was teaching young girls to please old men.

"Where are you, Quarshie?" She broke into her line of thinking to call to him. "I want to help you, but how can I? You must come back to me. You must. And wherever you are and whatever difficulties you are in they are because of Jo Jo. So I am going to settle that score with him for you," she reported. "He will have a respect for African ways before we are finished with him, and when we are finished he will be finished too."

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As the tide had fallen Quarshie had kept heading, as far as he could tell, to the east and seawards in an effort to maintain enough water under the raft to keep it afloat. Nonetheless, a little after midnight he had stuck, as the tide left them, amongst the roots and pneumatophores. The roots in the moonlight now stood well above the raft, enclosing it in a weird, arthritic palisade.

Several times there were small splashy explosive sounds which puzzled Quarshie until he realised that they were made by mangrove fish which came up out of their mud holes to lie on the exposed roots as the tide fell and then dropped back with a plop into the holes.

All the time the putrescent stench was many times worse than that of the paper mills which Quarshie had visited in

Canada. Even Linda was conscious of it and asked pathetically, "Am I making that awful smell?"

All through the night Quarshie had stopped poling the raft every twenty minutes or half an hour to give her sips of water or a little rice gruel and to attend to her other needs.

Shortly before dawn the raft refloated, though Quarshie slipped trying to push them off the bed of roots on which they were stranded and fell, painfully bruising himself and breaking the skin on his shoulder in several places. Now, since he had landed in the slime, the stink was part of him and he could do nothing about it.

A little after the sun rose he heard an unexpected sound. He was in a slight clearing, no bigger than the floor space of a large room, and was frustrated because he could not see the cause of the noise, which sounded like two or three helicopters. A little later he heard gunfire. The fort, he knew, could be no more than three or four miles away and he realised that an assault was being made on it. So, he thought with agony, if I had waited a few more hours we would probably have been rescued. Linda said, thickly, "Guns. Are they going to shoot at us, Quarshie?" She closed her eyes.

A bit later he heard the helicopters flying back, though two of them, from the sound of their engines and rotors, were probably making some kind of a search for them. Again he was faced with a difficult decision. Should he try to find a small open space and stay there in the hope of being seen or should he keep moving ahead? There was no method by which he could signal, no way he could light a fire.

With a fury that came close to hopelessness he kept the raft moving steadily towards the east.

****

The helicopters took everyone at the fort by surprise. The leading one had its side door drawn back and a man stood in the cabin behind a mounting of twin .50-calibre machine guns.

The gunner saw Joyboy and the superintendent lying out in

front of the guardhouse and opened badly directed fire on them. When he missed completely the pilot quickly circled back so that his gunner could try again.

Both the man on the ground had been woken by the sound of the helicopters but had not immediately been able to register what was happening. As the machine came round a second time the superintendent suddenly got to his feet and instinctively did what his army training had prepared him for: he returned the fire with one of the automatic rifles. Joyboy flattened himself on his stomach on the ground, put his fingers in his ears and closed his eyes.

This time the gunner had a standing target, and four .50-calibre explosive bullets hit the superintendent in the left shoulder, removing his arm and most of the left side of his thorax. When the firing stopped Joyboy opened his eyes to find he was looking directly at his mutilated companion. He was just in time to see the dying man's heart, amongst the ribbons of flesh and shattered bone, contract two or three times before it stopped beating.

Then something happened to him. Reaching out for the second gun, he shouted from his prone position, "You bastards. I'll get you for that. I'll get you. He was my friend. He carried me. You bastards . . ." But a burst of automatic rifle fire from behind him threw him forward on his face. "You bastards, you bastards . . ." he repeated and died.

What he had failed to realise, as had the others in the guardhouse, was that one of the helicopters with a squad of commandos had landed on the causeway inland from the guardhouse. In five minutes the whole operation was completed and the guards and the headman had been made prisoners. It took only another five minutes to discover that Quarshie and Linda were no longer in the fort. The grille from the sally port, lying out in the courtyard, indicated their escape route. There was no way, however, of telling what means they had used to get away through the swamp.

When he was questioned the headman was most insistent

that he had seen them there at six o'clock the previous evening.

All three helicopters were carrying their full load of men and armaments, which meant that they had only a limited amount of gasoline on board and the time they could spend airborne was also limited. The young captain in charge of the operation at once sent one helicopter back to the base to report and kept the other two searching the mangroves for as long as they could and still have enough fuel to return to Port St. Mary.

Colonel Jedawi ordered the three helicopters into the air again to continue the search as soon as they returned and had been refueled. They were the only helicopters owned by the Akhanaian military and had been recently acquired.

The pilots had no idea in which direction Quarshie would have headed, nor did they know whether he and Linda were still alive. They continued their search until it became too dark. Then they equipped one machine with a small searchlight and continued their patrol. In a total of some thirty-six flying hours the men saw nothing that would persuade them to believe that Quarshie was still alive—though, in fact, they flew over portions of mangrove swamp several times that were no more than a few hundred yards away from the man and the woman for whom they were searching.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

". . . she knew hatred for him that was stronger than she had ever felt for any man before."

The elderly man Mrs. Quarshie was talking to was naked to the waist, wore an old pair of khaki shorts and smoked a very stubby clay pipe. He had the massive shoulders and thick, solid pectoral muscles of a man used to paddling the heavy coastal canoes which once had taken men forty or fifty miles out into the South Atlantic. Like his fellow fishermen, his constant exposure to the sun had given him a charcoal-black skin.

Today, few of the fishermen paddled out to the fishing grounds but rode in canoes driven by outboards and the elderly man seldom went with them but stayed ashore fulfilling his role as his tribe's chief practitioner in African medicine.

He did not look his age, though the wide mat of his short-clipped moustache had a lot of white bristle in it. In a community in which most of the men were loud, he spoke uncommonly softly and gently. Also uncommon were his eyes, which seemed to survey the world rather blindly until the moment when they focussed on a person—then they had the piercing intensity of a laser.

He was an old friend of Mrs. Quarshie's who had served the women of his people through hundreds of pregnancies and demanded only modest payment from them and then only if the catches had been good.

He said, "It shall be as you ask. We shall await you this evening with everything prepared. Also I will make special

medicine for the safety of the doctor. If the waters of the ocean have him in their care he will be protected."

Jedawi had been afraid to tell Mrs. Quarshie of the attack on the fort and the failure to find her husband. So the chief priest's offer was a kind of insurance, in case the sea was in some way involved in Quarshie's affairs.

****

It was low tide and the raft was again stranded under the mangroves. Above Quarshie and Linda's heads the leathery leaves, with their wooly covering, kept the sun off them.

Quarshie, weary from his hours of struggle, was sitting where he normally knelt with his knees up, his elbows resting on them and with his head sunk forward, half asleep.

Suddenly he was aware of a curious sound and realised that it must be coming from Linda's throat. She was trying to scream but did not have the strength to do so. For a moment he did not take in what his eyes told him was happening. Then, with the iron bar which held the logs to the underside of the door, he lashed out furiously to dislodge an enormous crab which had a claw fastened on Linda's upper arm and was already squeezing blood from it. The blow, though swift, was well aimed and struck the creature between the point where its eyes stuck out on short-jointed stalks.

It let go immediately; its shell cracked and it dropped back into the slime. Linda screwed her eyes shut and tears welled from beneath her eyelids as she rolled her head from side to side. Quarshie, kneeling again, took her head in his lap trying to soothe her in the way a mother does a sick child. There was nothing else he could do, except to give her a few more sips of water and keep a sharp and constant watch to be sure that the same thing, or anything like it, did not happen again.

****

Mrs. Quarshie knocked on the door and when Jo Jo opened it she asked, "Are you Mr. Sugar Ray Weston?"

"That's right."

Mrs. Quarshie hoped that no one she knew had recognised her as she drove through town to Jo Jo's apartment. With Ruby's help she had made herself up and dressed to look like a senior member of the sisterhood of Port St. Mary's prostitutes or, perhaps the madam of a prosperous brothel. Her eyes were lined with kohl, her face heavily powdered, her lips daubed with a brilliant scarlet lipstick. She was also heavily perfumed and, adorned with multitudinous bangles and beads, she wore a very expensive rose-pink damask cover cloth. Arimi, dressed in his white beggar's tunic, stood just behind her.

"And who are you, may I ask?"

"My friends call me Millicent, Mr. Weston, and I think we may be in the same business."

"You don't say, baby. I thought maybe you were canvassing for the mothers' league. Is it something to do with that business that prompted your call? And who is the kid, a hustler?"

"Er"—the word was new to her—"he . . . finds customers for my girls, Mr. Weston."

"That's just what I said. Would you care to come in? You know"—he ran an expert eye over her—"you're quite a tempting dish yourself, baby." Under other circumstances Mrs. Quarshie would have found it hard not to giggle. She smiled—the word Jo Jo thought of was "dimpled"—at him, looked at him blatantly and invitingly, then lowered her long false eyelashes demurely.

Behind the face that she put on, and he saw, she knew a hatred for him that was stronger than she had ever felt. It was related to the way she felt about scorpions: they were dangerous and there was only one thing to do with them, kill them. Take care, she told herself. He is armed, and she wondered whether she was right to have kept Arimi with her. She had decided to bring him for protection but now, as she moved into the apartment, she wondered whether she was not leading him into serious danger.

****

Over and over again during the next day Quarshie heard the helicopters and knew that their task was hopeless. He kept hoping against hope that he would come out into a large stretch of open water but he didn't find one.

Linda's condition, he knew, had to be approaching a crucial point. She was suffering from greater abdominal destension and her spleen had become palpable. So far there had been no sign of haemorrhaging or delirium, only extreme torpor and a continued growth in her deafness. Perhaps, if they were lucky, there might be two or three days before a point of extreme crisis was reached.

With the remarkable ability he had for pulling photographically memorised texts of symptoms and treatments out of the filing system he had in his mind, he saw "morbid anatomy" as a heading. These two words were followed by: "there are four stages: hyperplasia; necrosis and formation of sloughs; ulceration; healing and circatrisation." He hoped she would last through to the fourth stage. If there were no complications and he could get her good nursing and proper treatment soon, the chances of survival were still fairly good.

For the umpteenth time he closed his mind to such professional problems and concentrated on propelling and navigating the raft. His hands had blistered and his knees were painfully sore. When the roots arrested the raft's forward movement he had to stand up, balancing delicately, and push the raft off sideways or backwards. Then he had to try to work it through another gap between the trees.

He was thirsty all the time, though his hunger had ceased to trouble him very much. All he would allow himself was a mouthful of water and that only seldom; Linda's need was so much greater than his because of her dehydration.

All the rain clouds, when they blew in off the sea, passed overhead and dropped their water somewhere inland. He did not know whether to be grateful or disappointed when this happened. If the rain fell Linda would get soaked, yet to have

the sweat and the stink washed off him and to be able to catch enough water to drink his fill would be wonderful.

As the sun set and again a helicopter passed nearby Quarshie wondered how great his reserves of strength and determination might be and whether they were enough to enable him to carry on, if need be, for several more days.

****

In the centre of the hard-packed mud in the medicine man's compound was an *okufu,* a mound which, at night, kept away the evil spirits. In the ground beneath it were a cat and a dog, which had been buried alive because of the cat's gift for being able to see in the dark and the dog's ability to scare off those with evil intentions.

Along the walls, on shelves cut out of the mud, or hanging from nails, there were bunches of herbs; there were neatly arranged piles of bark and roots; there were feathers, particularly the red tail feathers of grey parrots; there were little calabashes filled with distillations of all kinds; there were animal sinews and small heaps of tiny bones from frogs and mice; there were dried scorpions; eggshells; complete skeletons of a variety of fishes; skulls of small birds; claws of vultures and hawks and many species of dried seaweed. Elsewhere there was a display of the skulls of goats which had been sacrificed over many years. In one recess, with pots containing protective medicines in front of them, there were three human skulls.

"What is this place anyway?" Jo Jo asked Mrs. Quarshie.

"You might call it a sort of convent, I suppose," she told him.

"And this is where you come to recruit your girls?"

"Those who come here get the best training in everything."

"And you still call it a convent?"

At that moment the medicine man appeared accompanied by two nude and nubile fourteen-year-old girls and Jo Jo added, "Uh huh, see what you mean."

The medicine man spoke in his own language and Mrs. Quarshie told Jo Jo he was being greeted.

"Ask him how much he wants for those two chicks. Tell him that I'm an impulse buyer."

Mrs. Quarshie returned the greeting and added, "This one is an unmannerly one and there is much that he will say that I shall not pass on to you."

"Tell him that it is our custom to start a meeting by pouring a libation to the ancestors and then by sharing a drink. We should sit over there."

To Jo Jo, Mrs. Quarshie said, "It is the custom before doing business to drink to a successful outcome," and led the way to the seats.

As they sat down a third girl appeared carrying half a gourd with some liquid in it. She was not more than ten years old and was also naked.

"Start 'em young, don't they?" Jo Jo said. Mrs. Quarshie wanted to tell him the truth, that the place really *was* a convent and that the girls were taught what was expected of them when they served the gods. She mainly wanted to tell him that they went naked because adornment of any kind was expected to stimulate vanity. However, she let Jo Jo's comment pass.

The medicine man, who was dressed simply in a cloth which was bound around his waist and left his torso bare, poured a small quantity of the liquid on the ground and then took a drink himself.

"Hey, what did he pour it away like that for?"

"To show the ancestors that they are remembered. They are always present at every meeting like this."

"You have to be kidding. Now I really know what people mean when they talk about primitive Africans. If they believe that, they'll believe anything."

"Don't people in your country wear good luck charms?"

"But that's different. That's like putting money on a horse. You think it's going to win and you hope it will, but you can't be sure."

While they talked, the medicine man sat holding the cal-

abash tilted slightly towards him so that the tips of his thumbnails were just submerged in the liquid. When they stopped talking he handed the calabash across to Jo Jo and told him to drink.

"What *is* this stuff?" he asked. Mrs. Quarshie told him that it was African gin.

"So the drinks are on the house." Jo Jo sipped it, licked his lips and said, "Hey, that's good." And, uninvited, drank most of it.

Both Mrs. Quarshie and the medicine man watched him expressionlessly.

When he had satisfied his thirst he handed the gourd back to the medicine man saying, "Thank you, pop. That went down very nicely. Now can we get down to a bit of business? I can't take them quite as young as that chick who brought the gin, but the other two . . ." A slightly puzzled expression passed over his face. "Say, that stuff was powerful." He paused. "Well, what do you say we do a deal on the other two? How do we go about it? Does he have a price and we bargain? Or do I make a bid? Come on, help me, baby . . ." But neither Mrs. Quarshie nor the medicine man spoke. He looked from one to the other and found, surprisingly, that he could move his head only with difficulty. Alarmed, he tried to stand up and discovered that he could not move his legs. He wanted to raise his hand to rub his eyes and realised that he could not do that either. All his motor functions had become frozen; he could hear and see but that was all. And these functions also seemed to be slipping away from him. This illusion was heightened by the fact that no one—the three girls, the medicine man or Mrs. Quarshie—spoke or moved.

After a little while all he was conscious of was the medicine man's eyes. They were unblinking and gave him the feeling that they commanded the whole of his being.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

". . . it was a place in which evil was orchestrated to produce a sense of terror and foreboding."

Quarshie was in a condition that he, himself, using medical jargon, would have called "dissociation" caused by "hypoglycaemia." It was a state of detachment and light-headedness caused by a shortage of sugar in the blood and by exhaustion. It was also a condition which encouraged the development of hallucinations.

As he poled the raft forward he reverted to the instincts that had ruled his ancestors and the swamp became for him a region inhabited by the souls of all the evil people who had died. It was a place in which these souls lived in constant fear of each other and of their surroundings; it was a place in which evil was orchestrated to produce a sense of terror and foreboding.

A tiny glow of phosphorous faintly illuminated a horned toad and then the phosphorous went out and returned the grotesque image to darkness, leaving only an ugly scar on the memory. There was a whirr of wings, but there were no night birds in the swamp, so the sound had to emanate from some insect that was so large that its wings could sound like a bird's.

Then something cold and slippery slithered across the calves of Quarshie's legs, which were thrust out behind him. Whatever it was—he did not turn quickly enough to see it—it was washed on board by a large wave which set the raft rolling so that he had to lean forward to clutch Linda's shoul-

der for fear that she might fall overboard. The pot containing the rice pap did, in fact, slide into the swamp and disappear.

Shortly afterwards, passing underneath an overhanging bough, a spider's web caught his face and when he brushed it away the creature that made it fell into the water and was so large that it made an audible plop.

All these happenings were magnified by his dissociation until he felt a growing primordial terror that was beyond the scope of the mastery his training and experience had given him over his emotions.

And then . . . just at the point when his mind threatened to melt away, he realised that there were stars over his head and that the mangroves hung behind him like a cliff and were little more than head high in front of him. There was moonlight and, all around him, through the young and widely spaced trees, the water returned its silver to the sky. Also there was a sound of surf to his right which meant, he presumed, a sand bank.

Cautiously Quarshie edged the raft in that direction.

****

While Arimi slept in the car outside the medicine man's compound, Mrs. Quarshie sat tensely watching and listening to Jo Jo. He was no longer physically paralysed but his eyes were curiously empty as if they were of no use to him. All his sense had become subject to another and much more powerful personality, that of the medicine man. The drug, which had been under the latter's thumbnails and had dissolved in the alcohol, had been no more than the first step into the hypnotic trance in which he was imprisoned.

The girls had gone and there were only the three of them sitting in the light of an oil lamp on the ground which lit their faces from below, exaggerating some features with unnatural highlights and obscuring others. Around them the compound was almost in complete darkness except for odd places where the light caught the corner of a red hut or the eaves of a low

corrugated-iron roof. Above them was the dome of stars which Quarshie had just rediscovered.

Jo Jo spoke jerkily, the memories he was being called upon to revive coming back in a rough patchwork.

The medicine man asked questions and Mrs. Quarshie translated them. "Tell me about your mother." He asked, "What do you see?"

"A man coming into the house with her. She says, 'Sit down for a moment, honey. I gotta fix a thing or two in the bedroom.' When he sits down I go and stand between the man's knees. They come as high as my shoulders. He says, 'What do you want, kid?' Then my ma calls. She says, 'You can come up now, sugar.' And I go towards the stairs but the man gets there ahead of me and says, 'I guess she means me, not you.' There are always men and they are the ones she calls. She never calls me." The voice was expressionless. He needed little prompting . . . drifting in and out of past experiences as if one dissolved into another.

"There's this Puerto Rican kid. He says, 'You gotta have it clear in your mind what you're gonna do. You gotta be easy in your mind about everything except making money 'cause money means power and that's what you gotta get.' I'm maybe ten, eleven years old. I'm in a gang. Luis Cortez is the kid's name. He's two years older than I am and he's making a hundred dollars a day in the numbers racket.

"My mother moves across the river. The kids on that side don't know only two-bit humbugging. There are others like me from Bed Stuy. Soon ain't nobody going to stand up to us. We run the place. I get this idea, see? You make like a family, first a group of dudes you can trust. And that thing happens in prison, too. I mean you find people who have friends outside and you work with them because you can trust them, too. So that kind of stitches together the dudes who are on the outside with those who are on the inside."

The flat unemotional voice went on. What Mrs. Quarshie understood of what Jo Jo said she translated for the medicine man. As he grew older Jo Jo became the leader of the gang.

When they saw old people going into a bank to cash cheques they waited for them; when they came out they beat them and took their money. Soon they were starting to push marijuana, then pimping.

"Stealing and pushing is just a way of getting bread, man," Jo Jo explained, though they did not ask for explanations.

Though most of it was a foreign language to Mrs. Quarshie, she understood the tone of all he said and it reinforced her belief that the illness Jo Jo suffered from was a terminal one, that it was extremely infectious, and she thought of the effect it could have on the youth of Port St. Mary—thinking, of course, of Arimi.

When Jo Jo spoke of the man he had killed and mutilated and left on a garbage heap and of his plans for the Saysay, they concluded that Jo Jo represented a force that was new and unknown to them. Eventually the medicine man said, "I derive my power from man's fear of the unknown and I know how to use it because man needs to understand what it is that may touch him. This thing he had"—and he indicated Jo Jo by a look—"comes to us out of darkness and we cannot know or understand what it is. Therefore we must do away with it."

Mrs. Quarshie sat very still and waited for the medicine man to continue.

"I think it is better," he said finally, "that it is something which is done quietly so that no one else knows of it."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

"Make you go swim straight out to sea, never go stop. Swim and swim . . . Never go stop. Never come back."

At the first hint of dawn Quarshie got up from where he had been lying luxuriously stretched out on the beach and, taking the second twelve-yard length of white cloth, he laid it out parallel to the surf, weighting its ends with mounds of sand.

They had landed an hour earlier on the kind of spit which would, one day, turn the water on the landward side into a lagoon and thus extend the domain of the swamp. It had not been difficult to beach the raft or to carry Linda and her blankets ashore. Nor had it been difficult to decide that, at least for the time being, they should stay where they were. If the helicopters did not find them he would have to think again, but for the moment he needed rest.

The first thing he had done was to bathe in the sea and rid himself of his stinking skin of slime. He had been afraid to bathe Linda because she might take a chill.

The hardest task had been to stay awake to keep an eye on her and watch for a helicopter. In fact just before sunrise, the one with the searchlight flew past with the light beamed down along the shore line. The pilot saw the white cloth and at once turned back.

The rest was a matter of routine. The sand bank was too uncertain a surface upon which to land so the helicopter hovered over the site, a special stretcher was lowered and in it Linda was winched aboard. Quarshie followed moments later. The clasp of friendly hands on his shoulders as he was helped

into the cabin was one of the most agreeable moments in his life.

The helicopter was equipped for first aid and he immediately put Linda onto a saline drip. An hour and ten minutes later they landed in the hospital grounds and Linda was transferred directly into an intensive care unit in the infectious diseases section of the hospital. Quarshie stayed with her until an internist was brought in to take over.

Then a friend drove him home where he roused Hassan to find out what had happened to Mrs. Quarshie; Quarshie had been told at the hospital that she was safe and back in Port St. Mary.

"Some woman palaver, sah," had been Hassan's response. And he described Ruby and told how the two women had sat talking together for a long time and had then left with Arimi, Ruby heading for the airport.

For Quarshie all that mattered was that his wife was safe and whatever woman palaver she had gotten herself into could, he felt, wait until she came home and told him about it.

For the first time in nearly three weeks he ate, drank, bathed and went to bed without any feelings of anxiety.

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When they arrived at Jo Jo's apartment Mrs. Quarshie sent Arimi off with Ruby's airline ticket. She, the medicine man and Jo Jo then climbed the outside stairway with the American behaving like a puppet. It seemed as if the medicine man had taken over, telepathically, control of his movements so that he paused at the front door as if waiting for a signal to tell him to unlock it. He even half turned towards the medicine man before he put his key into the lock.

Earlier, in talking about the terrorist campaign that he and Joyboy had been waging against the Saysay, Jo Jo had revealed the fact that profits from his various operations in Port. St. Mary exceeded the equivalent of about $150,000. The gang's activities in the Saysay area, Ruby had told Mrs. Quarshie, had cost the lives of nineteen or twenty villagers.

As a representative of the Saysay people, Mrs. Quarshie had told the medicine man that the money Jo Jo had made in Port St. Mary should be paid to the villagers as blood money.

Because he had not wanted to draw attention to his activities Jo Jo had not banked the money but kept it in a suitcase. It was to collect the money that they were visiting his apartment.

After Jo Jo had handed over the suitcase the medicine man told Mrs. Quarshie to take it home in her car and to leave the American with him.

For a moment Mrs. Quarshie's hate left her and she felt unsure of her actions. The old man's eyes were on hers. He said, "When a dog goes mad its bite makes others mad too. It must be destroyed."

Mrs. Quarshie was not sure that that was a satisfactory answer, then she remembered the innocent people who had died, and did as she was told.

After locking the door of the apartment, Jo Jo and the medicine man walked down through the town towards the sea. In the early morning sunlight people were just beginning to stir. There was no wind and the sea was breaking on the beach in very small waves as if it, too, was not yet properly awake. Out on the horizon the cumulus puffed its shoulders until its head reached the cooler air where it spread in the shape of an anvil. Over the city itself there was not a cloud in the sky.

Anyone seeing the two figures walking eastwards along the wet sand might have thought of them as an incongruous couple. One, short, thick-set, naked to the waist, was smoking a pipe. The other, spare, even slender, was wearing a pale blue, see-through shirt with lace ruffles around the neck and down the front, tucked into skin-tight blue jeans.

After continuing for an hour they reached an empty stretch of beach and the medicine man stopped. Obediently Jo Jo stopped beside him. Taking his pipe out of his mouth, the medicine man spoke English for the first time. He said, "Make you go take off your clothes."

When Jo Jo was wearing no more than scarlet bikini-type underpants the older man spoke again. "Now, make you go swim. Make you go swim straight out to sea, never go stop. Swim and swim, catch sabee? Never go stop. Never come back."

The man who, earlier in the evening, had sneered at Africans for being primitive suckers, moved like an automaton.

The medicine man then went and sat on his haunches on the crest of the beach under a palm tree and smoked his pipe. To a casual observer he would have appeared to be a man who was relaxed and was meditating on the thunderclouds and the horizon.

It was not until it was almost evening that he suddenly seemed to be released from his fixed attention to the far horizon. Then he got up and went and picked up Jo Jo's clothes. He took them to the police station and handed them over to the officer in charge saying, "Some man go leave dis ting for for beach. I see 'um sun-up time. When I go back, sun-down time, he dey dey for same place. Look like some fellah go for swim. Don' come back."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

"And if we get one murderer I think we'll get all the others as well."

Quarshie stirred, snorted and opened his eyes feeling that he must have a good reason for doing so. Then he quickly closed them again sure that he had made a mistake. What he had seen hanging over him was a caricature of the woman who for many years had been his wife. But the voice did not sound like a caricature. It sounded right. It said, "Quarshie."

He opened his eyes cautiously again and then frowned.

Mrs. Quarshie was also puzzled. "You look as if you don't know who I am," she expostulated and then caught sight of herself in the mirror. "Oh," she said and started to laugh.

Quarshie wondered if she had gone mad. Then she threw herself on the bed beside him and, still laughing, worked herself into his arms.

Quarshie decided that, even if she did not look right, she felt right and tightened his embrace.

A little later he asked, "So why all the war paint and perfume? Are you short of money?"

"Quarshie!" she remonstrated, and told him her story.

"And Arimi?" She told him that story too.

"And now you?" she asked him. "Did you bring that woman back and were you faithful to me?"

Quarshie told his tale, then returned to her story. "How are you going to explain your actions with that American—what did you call him? Jo Jo—to Jedawi?"

"I'm not. He is not going to know anything about it. He

doesn't have to. Only the medicine man and I and Ruby know and Ruby does not know anything about the end." As an afterthought she added, "Neither do I, really."

"And the money?"

"I thought you'd ask that. Quarshie, I explained it to myself this way. Do you remember an aeroplane that crashed some months ago because there was something wrong with the way it was made and the people who made it paid millions to the relatives of those who died in the crash?"

"I do."

"That was blood money, Quarshie. The people who made the mistake in manufacturing that aeroplane were as guilty of murder as Jo Jo. Only he was worse. It was not by accident that my people died—he planned it that way. So he pays twice as much. First with his life and then with the money. Is that unjust when the money is there and the government, or somebody else, will get it while the people who really suffered won't get any recompense at all?"

Quarshie said, "Yes. I see. Well, we'll talk more about that after we have everything finished."

"You mean there is more?"

"Of course. The people who actually committed the murders were not Jo Jo or Joyboy. I think I know who was responsible in Sekodé. And if we get one murderer I think we'll get all the others as well. We'll go back tomorrow. We'll take Arimi too. Where is he?"

"He must have returned from the airport just after you came in, seen that you were asleep and put himself to bed. Hassan has had a very disturbed night. He had to get up three times. I must go and wash all this stuff off. Wait for me. I won't be long."

However, though Quarshie nodded and said he would wait, when she got back he was once again deeply asleep and did not wake even when she lay close beside him and lifted his head onto her shoulder.

CHAPTER THIRTY

". . . even the fiercest storms abate and the worst pestilences have an end."

Quarshie, Mrs. Quarshie and Arimi had been in Sekodé three days before the doctor called for a meeting of all the chiefs of the Saysay villages and their linguists as well as all those who had claims to chieftancy. Reluctantly, Quarshie, who had no great love of ceremony, had agreed with Jedawi on the form the confrontation should take with those who had been responsible for the deaths of the Saysay villagers.

He was dressed, as were the chiefs and others, in a rich shoulder cloth and he made an impressive figure. What, however, impressed the gathering even more than his appearance was the fact that a full platoon of army commandos was drawn up facing Quarshie on the further side of the circle in which everyone had been seated.

To heighten the drama of the occasion the captain of the platoon put his men through a short pattern of formal drill, then strutted across the circle, saluted Quarshie and returned to stand his men at ease.

Beside Quarshie, sitting at a table with a file of papers in front of him, was the new superintendent of police.

When the officer stopped giving his parade-ground orders and the commandos were at ease, the focus of attention moved back to Quarshie. He said, *"Owo Monolo"*—a formal style of addressing chiefs meaning "exalted rulers"—"even the fiercest storms abate and the worst pestilences have an end. I can tell you now that the storms and the pestilence that

have been affecting the Saysay are over." And he went on to tell his story. He spoke of the money which had backed the attempts to intimidate the people and he told his audience that records in Joyboy's office showed who it was amongst their own people who had been corrupted by this money to work against the interests of all of them.

At that point in his speech Quarshie nodded to the captain of the commandos, who at once shouted more orders to his men. They came to attention and then doubled out of their ranks to form an outer circle around the ring of chiefs and others. Once they were in position the men held their automatic rifles in front of them.

Then Quarshie went on to inform his audience that the new superintendent would read a list of names and that every man who was mentioned should walk forward into the centre of the circle where the police would be waiting to place him under arrest.

The superintendent had to call the first three or four names several times before the individuals responded. When they did move to the centre the police put them in handcuffs. Those whose names were called later came forward more swiftly. The last name to be called was Baduo.

Then the commandos were ordered back to their original position and Quarshie continued, "The means used by these men were designed to make your people think that what took place was the work of the gods. There were, however, some of you who believed that it was 'man-mischief.' The first event that persuaded me was the removal of the sacred stool. Only one man, apart from the chief, had the key to the shrine where it was kept. This, it seemed to me, was too simple an answer, particularly as the man was well liked and trusted. Also the culprit tried to lead me off his trail by also pretending to believe it had been 'man-mischief.' On second thoughts it appeared to me that such a person would be in a perfect position to commit all sorts of crimes. Then I learned that the evidence left by the mana'kpoi outside the shrine could have

been the work of men on stilts with the ends of the stilts carved to leave very small human footprints.

"The magic which was used to cause people to have bad dreams has long been known to our medicine men and is made by adding the juice of certain plants to food. The drug is tasteless and very powerful so that only a small amount has to be used.

"Most of the bodies of those who were murdered were found to be unmarked, and already prepared for burial. The easiest way to the brain is through the ears and the nose with a slender tool like the straightened fish hook which was used to kill one man. This is only surmise but you will, I think, find that it is confirmed by those amongst these people here who will talk. And they *will* talk . . . of that I can assure you," he added grimly, and then continued, "The man I suspected because he was the only one who had the key to the shrine is here now. He made his first and only clear mistake when I asked him to get me a taxi to go to Port St. Mary. He was the only man I spoke to, the only man who knew that I planned to travel that way, so he must have been the informer.

"Finally, there was the question of the voices which spoke to people from the trees, from piles of net and from the thatched roofs of their huts. I thought long about this when I was in prison and I found a way that could make it possible. What I needed to prove my theory was firm evidence. When I returned to Sekodé I engaged two people to help me find that evidence. They were the daughter of the true chief of the village, Ajua, and my son. They were regarded as children and therefore had more license to come and go than adults. Also Ajua had access both to the suspect's house—she did not have much difficulty in persuading him to allow her to clean it for him—and access to her father's key to the shrine. The man's house, as I expected, revealed nothing. But in the shrine the two young people found these things." The superintendent of police handed him two small black oblong boxes.

"In the country where they are made, they are called walkie-talkies. Our soldiers here and our police in Port St.

Mary are not unfamiliar with them." Quarshie turned and gave Ajua, who was also standing nearby, one of the boxes and told her to circle the chiefs with it slowly. When she was facing him from the other side of the meeting Quarshie said, "Here is how they work," softly into his microphone.

Ajua held it towards the men nearest her. When they heard Quarshie's voice they shook their heads in wonder. Some of them had heard of the equipment but none of them had seen it demonstrated.

"Can you hear me, Ajua?"

"Yes, sir, I can hear you." Quarshie held his section of the walkie-talkie towards those near him.

"Where did you find these things, Ajua?"

"Your son, Arimi, found them, sir. They were in the bottom of two large gourds which held very powerful medicine. He was very brave, sir. I told him I would not touch them."

Quarshie continued the demonstration until he was satisfied that everyone had heard the walkie-talkie in action and then explained how easy it would be for a man in the village to keep one piece of the equipment and speak into it and to plant the other, for instance, in a pile of coconut husks.

Finally he concluded by saying, "The actions of those in Biliani, of course, drew attention to their activities and they finally convicted themselves by them. The two leaders are dead, others who are incriminated by the documents we have found are being arrested and will be tried. In all it seems that" —Quarshie mentioned a figure in local currency which was the equivalent to more than $100,000—"has been spent in this area by the man who was backing this attack on your lives and your property. I mention this sum so that you may realise how great the potential of this region was assumed to be and to tell you that the government is prepared to invest such a sum—and more—to enable you to develop its potential." Quarshie had persuaded Mrs. Quarshie to pass Jo Jo's money to Jedawi on the condition that he, Quarshie, be allowed to make the announcement of its availability at the meeting.

"Owo Manolo, such is my report to you and I wish to say that I am happy to have been of some small value to my wife's people. In ways I am not free to divulge, she, too, has served you very well."

Quarshie hoped, but did not seriously expect, that that would be the end of the palaver. His expectation was proved correct. Mrs. Quarshie had told Ajua, when she had first come to her office, that Africans had taken to bureaucracy as if it filled a thirst. The truth was that they had been well prepared for it by their profound concern for protocol. What their one-time British rulers had called "good form" played an important part in their lives.

Quarshie had to be thanked and not one of the six true chiefs of the Saysay would let him leave the palaver until that "good form," prescribed as the correct behaviour, had been amply fulfilled. Nor did anyone show impatience but all listened respectfully and applauded, even the army and the police.

The only people who were made uncomfortable were the murderers, who were made to stand, manacled, at the centre of the circle.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

"This is not the time to talk about dying."

Aba said, "I came as soon as I could."

The old lady was sitting beside Linda's bed in the hospital. "You have been very sick but Nyampong kept you in his care even though he treated you harshly."

"Yes, I am better, Mother, but it is true that Nyampong has been hard."

"You are not, I think, talking of the sickness but of the fact that he brought you Quarshie and then took him away again."

"You saw that?"

"I am a very old woman and my eyes are weak but there is not much that I do not see. I know that you will get better from all that afflicts you. The man Prudence married is a good one, but not the only good one."

Linda said, "I shall forget most things which relate to my sickness. I shall forget nothing, no action, word or look that relates to Quarshie and all that he did for me."

"That is both good and bad. Good because I am sure that he gave what he had to give handsomely and it will be his reward that you remember him for it. Bad because when the signs of sickness are too well remembered it is as if the cure is not complete."

"Are you saying that my feeling for Quarshie is a sickness? Or are you telling me that I should not love a black man?"

"Neither. We are not animals that we must only love or mate with those who look as we do. What you must know is simple. It is that Quarshie does not need you. You are my

daughter so I can speak to you this way. In my house there is always a place for you, always a need for you. His house is full."

"And it is the daughter of your loins who fills it, not an adopted daughter. You are protecting her."

"Her, too . . . but you and Quarshie most. Make no mistake, my Prudence is strong. If you tried to take her man away from her it would be as if you fought over his body and he would suffer more than either of you. Is that what you want?"

"No." Linda shook her head then added unhappily, "You are right, Mother. Of course you are right. As soon as I am well I shall go home. I need to be able to look at all that has happened from a distance. Then what I see will not be out of focus because the things I am looking at are too close to me. After a while I shall come back to you, Mother . . . if you will have me . . . to finish my work."

"I will have you, daughter. In my home and the homes of all the Saysay you will always be welcome."

****

Arimi held the piece of wood up to the light, turning it slowly so that Ajua could look at it from every angle.

"What do you see?" he asked.

"A piece of wood which was first cut in a funny way and then polished."

Arimi put the carving down.

"It is my foster-father who cuts it and polishes it like that."

"Why?"

"It represents mysteries which only he can see."

"If he deals in such things it is no wonder the mana'kpoi fear him and stay away from here."

"If the mana'kpoi exist. Remember their name was used as a trick to cover up some man-mischief."

"So?"

"I wonder if all the activities which people think of as the

work of the mana'kpoi and other devils are not really the work of men?"

Ajua lowered her long lashes and asked, "Are there not others who make mischief?"

"There are others."

"Who would they be?"

With great daring Arimi replied, "Girls with beautiful eyes."

****

"So it was Baduo all the time. Why did you not realise that earlier?"

"If you want to put a goat where no one will notice it you must put it just behind the leader of the herd, especially if it is a bad goat pretending to be a good one."

Following her own rather eccentric line of thought Mrs. Quarshie told her husband, "The young man was not a bad goat. Jo Jo was not born bad. When he talked that evening under the control of the sansuma I started by hating him and ended by feeling sorry for him. Other men and women made him the man he was. When you plant a tree in a bog and surround it with other trees which have been in the bog so long that they have become diseased by it the new tree runs a double risk of being destroyed. First by the bog and then by the diseased trees. So the hope that such a tree will grow healthy and be fruitful must be very small. Jo Jo was born and raised in a bog in the richest country in the world."

"You did not tell me how he died."

"The sansuma said it would be a painless death."

Having seen Arimi and Ajua to their beds the Quarshies were on the way to their own. In fact, Mrs. Quarshie was already stretched out on the undersheet which covered her mattress. It was a hot night, as most nights in Akhana are hot, and she did not need any covers.

Her husband stood at the foot of her bed naked, as she was, looking down at her.

"Jo Jo certainly did not know what killed him or that he was about to die."

"But you did not witness the execution?"

Mrs. Quarshie turned away from her husband's question and gazed sightlessly at one of the louvred half-doors which divided the bedroom from the screened verandah.

Quarshie waited. When his wife looked back towards him she said, "This is not the time to talk about dying."

Her husband nodded gravely. "It is not the time to talk about anything," he told her. "Rather," and he smiled and broke the mood, "it is a time for action."

"Are you planning anything specific?" Mrs. Quarshie wanted to know and she too was smiling.

"Action to be effective means that there must be no resistance to it." Quarshie spoke speculatively.

His wife was emphatic in her response. "If we are speaking of the same thing then I must tell you that I was planning no resistance. On the contrary, you will have my fullest co-operation."

As Quarshie joined her on the bed and put his arms around her he told her, "That was all I wanted to know."

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